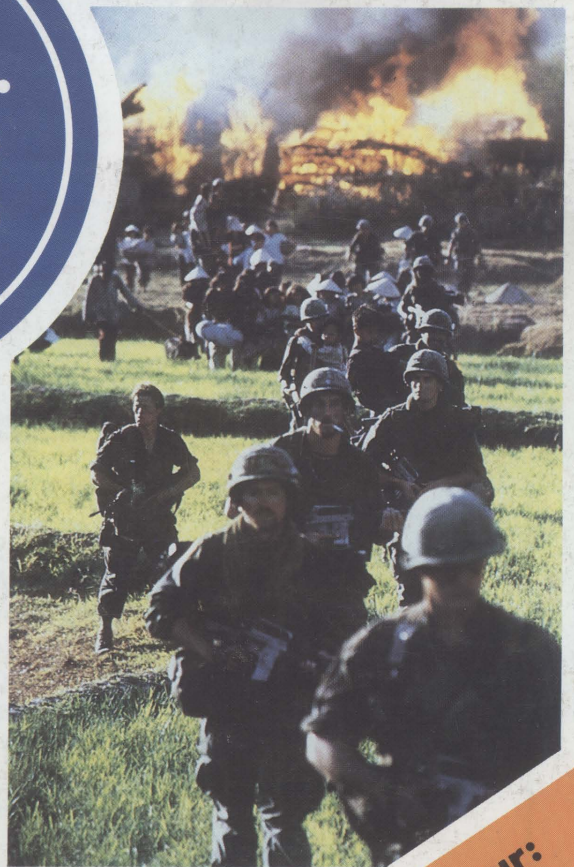


SIGHT & SOUND

INTERNATIONAL FILM QUARTERLY · SPRING 1987 · £1.65 · \$3.50



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SIGHT & SOUND

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On the cover: British-backed Oscar contenders: 'The Mission', 'Mona Lisa', 'A Room with a View' and 'Platoon'.

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Labour history: *The Wobblies* (1979), directed by Stewart Bird and Deborah Shaffer.

US documentary

The chill wind of Reaganomics

More commercial cinemas in the United States are showing documentary films than ever before but, ironically, many independent film-makers are facing a crisis of survival. Reaganomics pruning federal funding programmes, changes in attitudes on the grant/foundation level about what and how independent movies should be funded, 1986's new tax law discouraging private donations, and home video undercutting the once profitable educational market are major problems. Industry morale has also been affected by last year's demise of the Film Fund, the only organisation specialising in financing social issue documentary movies, and worries about the lack of new talent entering the field.

Inflation and Reagan's policies in the early 80s began this steady slide downhill. 'It took \$60,000 to make a half-hour documentary six years ago, now it takes over \$100,000,' says Debra Zimmerman of the feminist distribution house, Women Make Movies. However, many non-profit foundations, and consequently independent film-makers, are not receiving more money. For instance, the American Film Institute's Independent Film Program received the same federal grant of \$400,000 in 1986 that it took ten years ago; while the Corporation of Public Broadcasting—the funding arm of public television and a major sponsor of films—had its budget cut from \$172m to \$137m in 1983, and it has not been made up.

The proliferation of VCRs is destroying the only profitable segment of the documentary business. 'I've lost more than half my educational market income through people copying my documentaries off the air,' says veteran film-maker Frederick Wiseman. Added to this, the lower cost of video is beginning to push even 16mm print prices down, narrowing profit margins still further.

Independents specialising in films on social issues and Central and South America have also fallen foul of the shift in political attitudes. 'There's less academic freedom now,' says Oscar winning Lorraine Gray, whose most recent movie, *The Global Assembly Line*, almost aborted when the Republicans took over. 'The National Endowment of the Humanities allocated us money just before the administration changed. Suddenly we were told we couldn't have it.' Gray had to fight for over a year to have the decision reversed.

Film-makers involved with Latin American documentaries, like Deborah Shaffer, Susan Munoz and Glenn Silber, all report strong funding prejudices against specific projects. 'Public television is much more ticklish now about potentially controversial issues,' says Shaffer. 'Under the Carter administration the funding appointees in federal foundations were interested in topics like labour history. Now it's Great Works of Literature.'

On top of all this, federal, state and private foundations which traditionally only funded production costs are now financing distribution, so diverting precious funds away from film production. Some start-up programmes have disappeared completely. 'I was twenty years old without a credit to my name when I made my first

documentary film,' says Lorraine Gray. 'I received a \$13,000 Youth Grant. That programme doesn't exist any more, so how can newcomers even begin?'

Today's crop of young film-makers are looking to Hollywood for careers. 'They are aiming at the dramatic market because no one makes money with documentary films,' says Larry Sapadin, director of the documentary Association of Independent Video and Film-makers, in New York. 'They see the success of independent film-makers like Spike Lee, Jim Jarmusch, Susan Seidelman, and feel they, too, have a chance.' Even longtime documentarians are switching over. But, 'It's just as tough financing a dramatic feature as a non-profit documentary,' says Gray. 'Costs are higher, so you need more capital, and the money is given as an investment, not a charitable gift.'

Last year marked the first time the Grierson Award for the best first feature-length documentary was not given. The sponsors, the Educational Film Library Association, felt nothing produced by a new film-maker was of sufficient merit. 'I'm seeing fewer films of the quality and subject matter that I'd consider representing,' says Seymour Wishman, president of the documentary distribution house First Run Features.

So how do documentary film-makers and industry observers see the future? Increased video production at the expense of film, more community-based collectives and media centres, along with more commercial work supporting the documentary film habit are the main expectations and trends. 'Video production and collectives eliminate major costs like film labs and equipment hire,' says ex-Film Fund executive Lilian Jimenez, who is currently creating new funding

organisations for social-issue documentary films. This is all very well if you want to make videos. For the diehard film-maker there seems little choice but to make money from such sources as commercials.

Some observers feel the future isn't completely bleak. 'The religious Right have recognised and used the power of the mass media for years,' says Carolin Sachs, director of the Benton Foundation in Washington, DC. 'Now the more liberal US foundations are waking up to the need to support the media as effectively.' The need for political and social change to revitalise the industry is a given. 'Look at Britain,' Sapadin says. 'In the late 70s people thought the British independent film business was dead. All it took to revive it was Channel 4. With a change in government policy here, things could turn around overnight.' However, no one is holding his breath. Not yet, anyway.

LINDA LYNTON

Delhi

Let there be light, and new carbons...

Delhi has never been one of India's film cities in the same way as Bombay, Madras or Calcutta. But it nevertheless is where government is sited, and government, through the National Film Development Corporation, the Festival Directorate and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, controls all film festivals in the country, even the non-competitive events, called Filmotsavs, which every second year travel to other parts of India.

This year it was Delhi's turn again, and the eleventh competitive event mounted a huge programme under the first-time leadership of Mrs Urmilla Gupta, mostly at the Siri Fort, the headquarters of the latest Asian Games, which is now likely to be turned into a permanent film centre. Mrs Gupta, potentially as lively and popular an artistic director as the Festival has had for some years, came late into the job and found it hard to cope with a situation that perpetually seemed on the edge of chaos. Added to that, she could find nothing outstanding for the competition section and was refused a lot of films for the information screenings, largely because India doesn't buy very many foreign films or pay much for those it does acquire.

In all, it was a recipe for much criticism, especially since the Siri Fort is a long way from the hotels which housed the delegates, as were the other cinemas used. It doesn't make a lot of sense

expensively to entertain an international jury (headed this year by Humberto Solas, the Cuban director) and then to give it very little to see in the way of quality films. Nor for the NFDC to spend a great deal of money on mounting an Indian Panorama, many of whose films it had produced itself, and then to display them at an outlying cinema with lamentable projection. Shyam Benegal, whose *Susman (The Essence)* was in the Panorama, simply told the cinema's manager that, if the projection was as bad as for the previous films, he would stop it and leave him to the consequences. Another director gave the projectionist enough money to buy some new carbons. But next year Filmotsav takes place in Trivandrum, Kerala—very much a film town where even 'art' movies can draw crowds. It is to be hoped Mrs Gupta is in charge again, for there she will have a better chance.

The Panorama threw up several films of considerable merit, and one at least that will probably become a classic of the Parallel Indian Cinema. That was Aravindan's *Oridathu* (the English title will probably be *Somewhere, Sometime*), which is about the bringing of electricity to a remote village in Kerala, the state the director hails from. Aravindan, now a poet, musician and cartoonist as well as film-maker, was once an Electricity Board worker, so it could be said that he knows exactly what he is talking about. But his film is not so much about such practical matters as a warning that there's a dark side to new technology even when it is concerned with heralding light.

In the end, the operation manages to disrupt the whole community and calamity strikes. But before that we witness one of the most charming parables the Indian cinema has vouchsafed to us in recent years, in which no one is criticised but no one is wholly guiltless. Aravindan's touch has always been rather like that of Jiri Menzel, lyrical without being sentimental, witty without being patronising. And the village community of the 50s is summoned up with a hundred deft touches. What is more, the film is beautiful to look at, thanks to Shahji's evocative camerawork.

Two other films from what Delhi people would probably call the Deep South also made a considerable mark. One was John Abraham's *Amma Ariyan (Letter to Mother)*, which is the first production of Odessa Films, a co-operative which sold 100-rupee (£5) shares in the film and also accepted thousands of donations of from two to ten rupees. Abraham, whose *Donkey in a Brahmin Village* some years ago established him as one of the natural

heirs to Ritwik Ghatak, the revolutionary Bengali director who also had Aravindan's feeling for individuals, has come up with a highly personal film that seeks to trace, through the story of a disillusioned student, writing letters to his mother as he travels through Kerala, the reasons for the break-up of the radical movement that swept the province in the 1960s. The film has fire, passion and a determination not to do the obvious thing. It is also quite rough and ready in style. But, despite obvious faults, it is immensely striking, both in conception and execution.

So too is Pavithran's *Uppu (Salt)*, a third film to travel deep into the lovely Kerala countryside to tell its story of a Muslim woman, happily married, who is forced to leave her husband for another, richer man in order to shore up the fortunes of everybody but herself. This is a slow-moving but brilliantly controlled film which tries to show how Muslim law exploits women, often with the best of motives. If everyone else is happier this way, why not the woman? Pavithran, a Muslim himself, who has made two films before, is clearly a new talent of some importance, unafraid of using a very spare script and creating tension largely through his expressive visual imagination.

These three films reflect great credit on the often ignored Malayalam cinema, another of whose major talents is Gopalakrishnan, a BFI Award-winner. He will have a new film ready within a few months, and the auguries are good for Trivandrum next year.

DEREK MALCOLM

Hawaii

A Chinese childhood masterfully recreated

The Hawaii jury—chaired by Susan Sontag and including Lino Brocka and Shashi Kapoor—gave the festival's prize to a Thai film, Euthana Mukdasnit's *Butterfly and Flower*, which richly deserved it. But it could hardly overlook the one obvious masterwork in the six-film competition, and so invented a Special Jury Prize for the Taiwanese film *The Time to Live and the Time to Die*, directed by Hou Xiaoxian. This announcement was greeted with delighted approval by everyone present except Hou Xiaoxian himself, who sat baffled in his seat. Pushed to the microphone, he bravely summoned up words from his minimal store of English and explained that he had no idea what was going on. Such are the perils of reaching hands in friendship across the Pacific...

The Hawaii Festival is growing fast, perhaps too fast for an event that is still run by a handful of paid staff and a corps of well-meaning volunteers, given that some of the screening venues are as much as twenty miles apart. But there was plenty to see, and plenty to listen to in the symposium, which continues to provide the festival with a sturdy backbone. This year's theme was 'Humour in Cinema: East and West', and it yielded a crop of disparate papers, from a detailed structural analysis of a 1962 Chinese comedy to an account of the seminal influence

of Chaplin on Raj Kapoor. The most sobering (and moving) contribution was Professor Ali Afaqi's forlorn explanation for the absence of humour from Pakistani cinema. Forums like this rarely achieve a tight focus, but Hawaii's symposium has the overriding merit of creating cross-cultural contacts that would otherwise not exist; there is nowhere else where Asians, Americans and Australasians share ideas about their film cultures.

The Festival got off to a disarming start with the premiere of a new Asian-American feature, Steven Okazaki's *Living on Tokyo Time*. A perky young Japanese woman visiting San Francisco outstays her tourist visa and marries a convenient Japanese-American to get a green card. The film centres on her devastating effect on the boy, a talentless rock guitarist whose personal magnetism barely matches that of the junk food he lives on. Thrown together by bounds from the Immigration Department, they act out a ruinous relationship rich in misunderstandings, recriminations and sullen silences. Okazaki's direction is not much more animated than his anti-hero, but the tone is well-judged and there are endearingly funny performances from Minako Ohashi and Ken Nakagawa.

Im Kwon-Taek's *Kilsottum* is the most striking film from South Korea in several years. It is set in the summer of 1983, when KBS television put out a programme to reunite families separated 33 years earlier in the Korean War. The programme immediately became a national event and ran for days on end. Im opens his film with long and riveting segments from the programme, and later incorporates footage he shot among the crowds outside the TV station. Within this actuality framework, he tells the fictional story of a long-dispersed family that comes back together, only to find that the pieces no longer fit. The sentimentality and melodramatics that one has come to dread in Korean cinema are completely absent here, and the film draws some provocative conclusions about the partition of the country and its effects on the national psyche.

Euthana Mukdasnit's *Butterfly and Flower* is equally unexpected, and even more impressive. It's based on a novel well known in Thailand, but you'd never guess; the film is only fleetingly 'literary', and for the most part is blessed with a visual fluency and resourcefulness worthy of the young Raoul Coutard. It's about a group of Moslem kids in a village in the south of the country, who earn a living of sorts smuggling bags of rice on through trains

Oridathu.



across the border into Malaysia. The central character is a gifted teenager forced to drop out of school because his family desperately needs extra income who gets drawn into the trade. The kids are brilliantly directed, but Euthana's real triumph is that he makes the unfamiliar milieu and characters as emotionally vital as they are credible. The film is sweet, unquenchably moral and very beautiful. It is also quite unlike any other Thai film.

Hou Xiaoxian's *The Time to Live and the Time to Die* is at least 70 per cent autobiographical. It offers remembered scenes from Hou's own childhood and adolescence, filmed in the rooms and on the streets where they originally happened. And it's Hou's own voice that speaks the narration at the beginning and end, confirming the intimacy and candour of these memories. But the film is also about the generation that fled the hardships of Mainland China in the late 1940s, settled in the comparative prosperity of Taiwan, and then (after 1949) found itself unable ever to go home. It's a story never before told on film, and certainly never visualised in such piercing and accurate detail. It is almost inexpressibly moving that the mischievous child and delinquent adolescent seen in these memories should have matured into the director of this film, but the film's emotional strength ultimately springs from a series of charged moments in which the specific is indistinguishable from the general. In its reach, its innovations and its aesthetic mastery, it is a momentous step forward for Chinese cinema, as important in its way as *Yellow Earth*.

TONY RAYNS

The Time to Live and the Time to Die.



Chéreau's Chekhov

Platonov at twenty

Patrice Chéreau is best known for his revolutionary work for the operatic and theatrical stages: he was responsible, notably, for the first complete staging at the Paris Opéra of Alban Berg's *Lulu*, for the most brilliantly radical of postwar *Rings* at Bayreuth (which, when televised by BBC2, generated gratifyingly high viewing figures) and for a mesmerising production of *La Dispute*, a hitherto fairly obscure philosophical squib by Marivaux, which made its subsequent way around the globe.

But, as well as two recent acting appearances—as a somewhat self-consciously otherworldly Saint-Just in Wajda's *Danton* and as an unself-confident Napoleon in Youssef Chahine's *Adieu Bonaparte*—he has also directed three films. *La Chair de l'Orchidée* (*The Flesh of the Orchid*), a garish adaptation of the sequel to *No Orchids For Miss Blandish*, featured an anorexically ravishing Charlotte Rampling as the much put-upon heiress. *Judith Therpauve* starred Simone Signoret as a feisty widow striving in vain to prevent her husband's newspaper from being devoured by a tycoon not a million miles away from Robert Hersant, the French Rupert Murdoch. And, by far the best of the trio, because self-confessedly the most personal, *L'Homme Blessé* (*The Wounded Man*) was a morbidly fascinating descent into the homosexual hell of *pissotières* and *louche* leather

bars, containing scenes that—given the 'AIDS Code', so to speak, which the industry has been compelled to impose on itself—would most likely be unfilmable today.

Chéreau, perhaps rightly, allows only the last of these to be worthy of his or anyone else's comment. But, finding his original vocation now rather cramping ('Everything I stage in the theatre,' he dourly told me, 'I stage out of my hatred for the theatre'), he has felt increasingly drawn to the cinema. When I interviewed him last November, he was shooting *Hôtel de France*, an adaptation of Chekhov's first, untitled and almost unperformably sprawling play which had always been referred to as *Platonov* until Michael Frayn triumphantly revised it for the National Theatre as *Wild Honey*.

The situation of the play centres on a group of friends who are reunited after an unspecified number of months (or years) in a large, slightly seedy country house (for which a provincial French hotel substitutes in Chéreau's updated version) and, particularly, on Platonov himself, a witty, cynical, womanising schoolmaster and a classic specimen of the 'superfluous man' peculiar to nineteenth century Russian literature. But Chéreau has, to put it bluntly, no truck with Frayn's conception of the drama. For me, *Wild Honey* was shocking. Chekhov wrote the play when he was twenty and, although he did not give his characters any ages, it's quite evident he was thinking of his own generation. To be disillusioned at forty is a cliché. To be disillusioned at twenty is far more vertiginous.

Consequently, his cast mainly consists of young unknowns, drama students inducted from the school he runs at the Théâtre des Amandiers at Nanterre; and it is his intention actually to produce the play on stage there at a later date, an apparently topsy-turvy order of priorities which nevertheless corresponds to an intelligent and ingenious approach to the direction of actors. 'If actors are being rehearsed, there comes a point in their relationship to the text and to each other when they are ready to play their characters for the movie camera. Rehearse them even more—paying, of course, all the necessary attention to the implications of the very dissimilar scenic space that will be at their disposal—and they are able to play the same roles evening after evening on stage.' Chéreau is as yet uncertain, however, as to how closely the theatrical text will resemble that devised for the film version.

'What interested me most in the project,' the film's scenarist

Jean-François Goyet later remarked, 'was Patrice's determination to eliminate all the bitter-sweetness, all the cobwebby nostalgia, of Chekhov's "image"—his conviction that the crumbling of one's ambition, one's obsession with the relative success or failure of acquaintances, the almost voluptuous way in which one lets oneself decline into stagnation, that these are all things that can happen at any age. In that sense, it's going to be a really personal film.' Personal? For Patrice Chéreau, currently the most adulated, most sought-after theatre and opera director in the world? 'Even so. He might secretly have preferred, after all, to become a great writer or composer.'

GILBERT ADAIR

Man of Africa

The film that Kachakurubango made

Thirty-three years after it was rejected by the cinemas, the first feature film with an all-African cast was shown at the 1986 London Film Festival. How *Man of Africa* was rescued from oblivion by its director, Cyril Frankel, makes a fascinating story.

The film began with the mundane title *Soil Erosion*. A British agricultural officer called John Purseglove had brought to the Kigezi district in Uganda's south-west corner the new thinking on soil conservation which grew out of the bitter experience of the American Dustbowl in the 1930s. He introduced terracing and encouraged people to move away from the overpopulated highlands. *Man of Africa* is based on the migration of the Bakiga people from these eroded highlands to new homes in the bush-covered lowlands, where they had to contend with wild animals and malaria. The hero is a young man who is injured by a buffalo and nursed back to health by the lowland pygmies. He was played by Frederick Bijurenda, a member of the present Uganda government.

Uganda in the 1950s was a British protectorate, and the Colonial Office had commissioned the Crown Film Unit to make a documentary. Cyril Frankel, who says that he was educated largely at the Finchley Park Astoria and that his knowledge of Africa at that time was mainly from Tarzan films, flew to Entebbe by seaplane in 1952.

He called on the Governor and then set out in a truck on the 350-mile journey to Kabala, Kigezi's only town. There he met Paulo Ngologoza, secretary-general and chief, and his assistant, Sep Mpambara, who

spoke better English. He struck up an immediate friendship with Ngologoza. 'He said he looked into my eyes and knew he could trust me to record his people and their way of life. Because of this trust and Sep's help as interpreter, I was able to make a complete reconnaissance.

'The pygmies always had nicknames for people. They called me Kachakurubango, the One with the Long Neck, and composed a song about it. I admired their songs, their poetic language, their way of thinking. We shared food and banana beer. I found myself making many loving friends and I returned to Britain full of enthusiasm.'

The British government, however, was cutting its spending and it closed down the Crown Film Unit. That apparently was the end of the Kigezi film, until John Grierson invited Frankel to make it for Group 3, the organisation which sought to encourage new film-makers, with the backing of the National Film Finance Corporation.

So Cyril Frankel set out again for Uganda, this time with scriptwriter Monty Slater and cameraman Denny Densham. The Kigezi documentary was to become the first dramatic film to be made with an all-black cast. 'There were no professional actors in Uganda. Makerere University had a dramatic society but its members were not necessarily from the south-west. I decided to use people who had not acted before. I gave acting tests to a carpenter, a dressmaker, a pygmy. I put in an old man who had never been more than a mile or two from the place where he was born. Many of the actors did not speak English.'

Cyril Frankel visited Uganda a third time, with a film unit of eight, and stayed sixteen weeks. 'It was a very deep experience and very hard work. You ceased to think of these people as in any way different from us, except in the clothes they wore.' The man he first chose for the leading part was too tense to act realistically, and Frankel replaced him with Frederick Bijurenda, who had come to be assistant interpreter. 'He turned out to be wonderful.' Another difficulty was that an old man dies in the film, and local people thought that, if you acted dead, you would indeed die. The actor, however, agreed to act dead. 'I'm a very lucky man,' he said. 'I will know who comes to my funeral.'

When the film was finished, says Frankel, 'We knew we had done something no one had done before. We had presented these African people as they really were at that time. Before that time, a black man in films was usually either a comic or a servant.' Then came the blow.



The British at home, 1938. National Museum of Photography.

Michael Balcon, chairman of Group 3, rejected the film and so did the British cinema chains. All that was shown was a travel film drawn from it.

The failure to show *Man of Africa* worried Cyril Frankel for thirty years. Then two years ago a friend saw it listed among films in the National Film Archive, and Frankel asked to see it. Unfortunately, it had been run twice and the rules of the Archive prevented it from being shown again. Frankel got the BBC interested, but not to the extent of spending a large sum on making a copy. 'Then I realised how much had changed. There is now a black audience here in Britain. Films get shown on tv. There's Channel 4 showing programmes for minorities. I thought I must make a major effort to get *Man of Africa* shown on tv.'

He managed to acquire the rights to the film and another copy of it turned up. 'I got the original cameraman and editor and we ran it in a little cinema. We were deeply moved. We decided a tremendous injustice had been done not only to us but to the people of the Kigezi district.' The BBC was not sure about showing it. Channel 4, however, provided the money for a new print. Frankel was able to add in from the Archive copy some missing sequences, particularly a baboon hunt. 'Rank, with tremendous care, produced a beautiful copy,' he says. 'The quality is extraordinary; there was no electricity in Kigezi, no lights. The colour astounded the audience at the London Film Festival.'

DAVID SPARK

Vaut le détour

Bradford's hands-on TV displays

The National Museum of Photography in Bradford is famous. Yet it was only through a chance encounter with one of its consultants that I learned of the opening of two new television galleries, and as my travelling companion on this occasion remarked, it is an exquisite irony that the museum which now devotes two whole floors to exhibiting some of the most up-to-date communications technology should be virtually inaccessible by direct train from London.

In fact the galleries are well worth the special trip. One describes 'The Story of British Television' and the other is called 'Television Behind the Screen'. True to the Bradford principle, much of the exhibition is 'hands on' and on the day of my visit it was packed with children (mostly boys, it must be said) eagerly pressing buttons, twiddling knobs and jockeying for position in front of the screens. Accompanying adult males were also out in force, having deserted in large numbers the splendid display of feminist photography which was on tour in another part of the building.

The story of British television is as hotly contested as Our Island Story. Much space is still devoted to John Logie Baird, and the early years are depicted as a race between two rival systems with Baird's only conceding victory to Marconi/EMI/RCA as late

as 1937. Clearly, this was an unfortunate episode for the national sense of honour, and the display is prudently laconic when it comes to the political and technological reasons why anyone thought Baird's system might fly. However, once launched, British tv rapidly took off: here is Ally Pally, with Joan Miller in the studio connecting viewers with interviewees; here is a reconstructed prewar drawing room (circa 1938) with the family (Ma, Pa, Girl and Boy) grouped round a wooden cabinet attempting to make out the images on a flickering screen. Anyone who saw Frank Abbot's *Workers' Playtime* will know how extraordinarily beautiful some of these objects are, and Bradford has more than enough of them to please the cognoscenti.

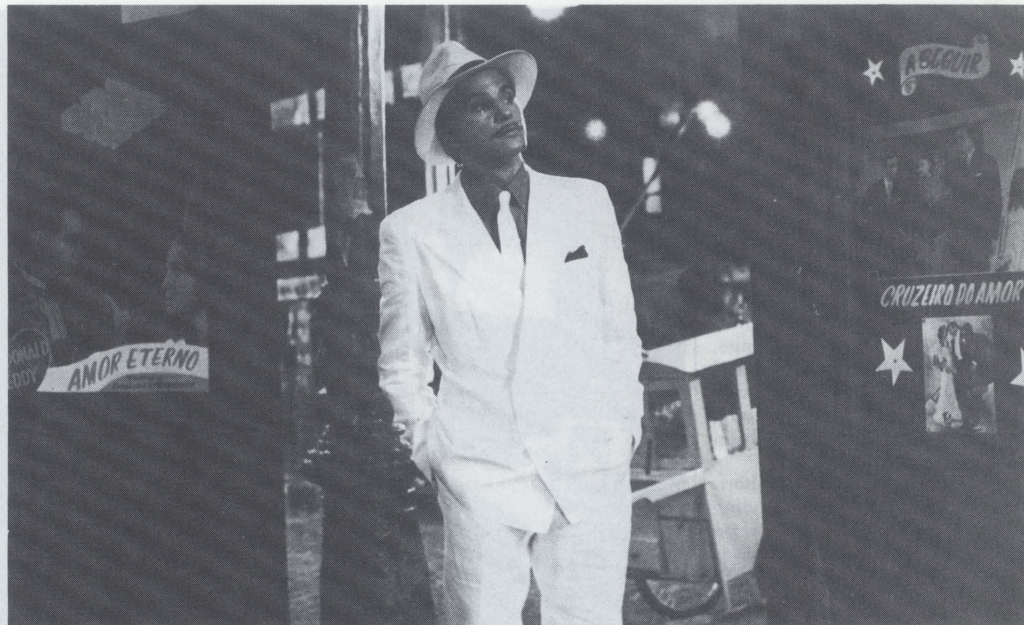
Then come the more familiar milestones—the beginning of rrv, video recording, the growth of outside broadcasts, colour, BBC2, Channel 4, satellite tv and so on. Best of all—at least for middle-aged viewers—is the constant screening of excerpts from old favourites like *Andy Pandy*, *Muffin the Mule*, *Dixon of Dock Green*, *Z Cars* and many, many more. The main sponsors of this gallery are BBC tv and Thorn EMI, and it is very much the official history, with the contribution of independent television and the growth of television as an international medium being played down as a result. The gallery has a comfortably parochial feel, and although this may be well judged in relation to its audience it may not be altogether appropriate for a national museum.

On the other hand, 'Television Behind the Screen' is quite simply wonderful. This is family entertainment with a vengeance. The gallery has two main sections, one devoted to broadcasting technology and the other to programme-making. In the first, each cabinet is designed so that the visitor can activate a demonstration of how a technical process actually works. It has to be said that several were out of order on my visit and the remainder were hogged by tough-looking small boys, but both impediments point to the success of this kind of display. The high point is the 'Magic Carpet' which uses 'Chromakey' (colour separation overlay) to allow young visitors to sit on a rug and watch themselves on screen being transported over exotic landscapes. Magic!

The programme-making section treats both news and drama. Here is what I hope is a tongue-in-cheek scene from a putative production of *Beauty and the Beast*, with a highly improbable Beast and an impossibly blonde Beauty enacting their parts while the director talks through the lighting cues. It was interesting that many patrons listened to the loop more than once just to make sure it wasn't for real, and their doubts suggest that the scene is highly informative at the same time as contriving to debunk the mystique of tv. 'Making the News' has a mock-up control room containing a bank of monitors such as confront any producer any day of the week, with authentic material supplied by the tv companies. No mere description could convey half as well the series of split-second choices that have to be made every night at six, seven, nine and ten, and the excitement of being on the air.

I am unclear as to what the division of labour will be between the Bradford Museum and MOMI when it opens (except, of course, that MOMI is privately funded). But with these new galleries it seems that Bradford has stolen a march. Hitherto, its exhibits have concentrated on the technology, but for the first time in the television galleries they have addressed the problem of how to exhibit the moving image, and have succeeded in doing this in a highly accessible manner. In addition, television is now so obsessed with its own history that it is refreshing to have production and history firmly juxtaposed so that the visitor never loses sight of the immediacy which is, after all, one of the things that distinguish television from cinema. In my Michelin guide to museums in Britain, Bradford now has star rating.

JILL FORBES



Opera do Malandro.

FestRio

A comeback for Brazil and Argentina

The third FestRio saw the triumph of *My Beautiful Laundrette* in competition and the substantial entry of British films into the Latin American market. Larry Coyne, director of Film Four International, enthusiastically claimed that he was able to do more business in Rio than in Cannes last year, and a homage to British cinema at the next festival became a priority for the organisers.

The American independents, who have already tapped this potentially profitable market, sent a strong line-up of films. More significant, however, was the powerful comeback by Argentina and Brazil. Alfonsín's Argentina is, it seems, ideal territory for young directors to explore; and the exiled filmmakers are beginning to return. The situation in Brazil is more complex, and the films on offer reflected the deep contradictions of a troubled but essentially confident society with a cinematic tradition that goes from Glauber Rocha to the *porno chanchada*.

Three films, in particular, appear to represent the key developing trends in Brazilian cinema: *Baixo Gavea* by Haroldo Maranhão Barbosa, *Anjos do Arrabade* by Carlos Reichenbach and *Opera do Malandro* by Ruy Guerra. It is also worth mentioning the excessively talkative *Cinema Falado* by the popular folk-singer Caetano, still much under the spell of Glauber Rocha but as yet without the 'vision'; *Cidade Oculta* by newcomer Chico Botelho, set in Liberdade (San Paolo's Chinatown) and

close to that sprawling city's youth culture; and *Destino a cor do seu* (*The Colour of Destiny*), a semi-autobiographical debut by the Chilean exile Jorge Duran (ex-assistant to Hector Babenco), which won first prize at the Brasilia Film Festival.

Baixo Gavea centres on the staging of a play based on the lives of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa and his soul-mate Mario de Sa Carneiro. Pessoa is played by a woman, thus further complicating the four-part personality by which he distinguished four futurist approaches to poetry. She is a lesbian and lives with a heterosexual (female) director. The film, which is marked by formal rigour, explores the uneasy relationship between European and Latin American culture, and the still taboo subject of female homosexuality. A brave film in both form and subject matter, it's a considerable advance on Barbosa's previous semi-serious *Engracadinha* (1981), which also starred Lucelia Santos, Brazil's most popular actress since Sonia Braga.

Reichenbach's poorly titled *Suburban Angels* continues this underrated author's search for a way to make a social statement within a commercial story. The subject, this time, is the plight of four women teachers in Sao Paolo, coping with the violence and deprivation of their 'catchment area'. Hard-hitting and to the point, as always, Reichenbach paints a picture of Brazilian life unknown to most beach-bound festival visitors. *Opera do Malandro*, by the veteran director Ruy Guerra, was shown at Cannes and has already attracted attention. A stylish, moody and passionate variation on the *Threepenny Opera*, the film is

also important as an indication of the willingness to engage in challenging co-production (with Karmitz's MKII in France). The last word, however, must go to Argentina, whose no-budget semi-documentary *Geronima*, on the tragic life of a Patagonian Indian woman clinging to her children in the face of conventions she does not understand, was, for many, the festival's high point.

DON RANVAUD

Rotterdam

The once and future cinema

The Rotterdam Festival is gradually expanding in scope and attendance, while its survival seems to become increasingly polemical and precarious. Now in its 16th edition, the festival continues to honour its director Hubert Bals' stubborn, utopian precept that, 'An audience should be found for a film, not a film for an audience.'

Thus, while *Libération* critic Serge Daney was lecturing persuasively on the growing impossibility of critics mediating between films and audiences, it was possible to watch a videotape, *Joan Does Dynasty*, in which New York critic Joan Braderman, with the aid of Manuel De Landa's computer graphics, does precisely that for the tv series. She appears in front of *Dynasty* in different sizes, shapes and positions, from diverse angles and with varying degrees of transparency, and delivers an exuberant, madcap critique of the show. Part of a cycle of low-budget, leftist media critiques known as Paper Tiger Television which appears on us public access

cable and boasts more than a hundred titles in its catalogue, Braderman's pungent intellectual stand-up is the likely formal masterpiece of a variable, slapdash series ranging from the unfocused and obvious (Peter Wollen on the US press in general) to the razor-sharp and subtle (Herb Schiller on the *New York Times'* foreign coverage).

Another form of instruction came from the Jim McBride retrospective, charting the checkered career of the one-time New York independent who began in the shadow of the New Wave with David Holzman's *Diary* (1967) and eventually entered the Hollywood mainstream with his *Breathless* remake (1983), followed by the more confident (and more conventional) *The Big Easy*, a sexy crooked cop story set in New Orleans with only a nodding relation to his early work.

The kicker in the series, however, was *The Once and Future King*, a recent half-hour *Twilight Zone* episode that powerfully illuminates the closed circuits of the Hollywood recycling machine and the Reaganite nostalgia which fuels it. An Elvis impersonator of the 80s is magically transported back to Memphis 1954, accidentally kills his idol, and winds up cutting Elvis' first record himself. He then spends the rest of his guilt-ridden life trying to live up to the legend he has created, retreating into drugs and paranoia as he realises he can never do the King full justice. A poignant rendering of the process by which Hollywood from *Star Wars* to *Blue Velvet* forecloses any autonomous grounds for a present or future, the show is itself eerily framed (as usual) by off-screen commentary from a Rod Serling imitator—further suggesting that the once and future cinema can emerge from its cage only by learning to reoccupy the present.

Sara Driver's ravishing deadpan comedy *Sleepwalk* does just that, but at the cost of many unfashionable refusals. This nocturnal Rivetean fantasy about a stolen Chinese manuscript in lower Manhattan shares the same compositional beauty and rigour and the same oddly striking actress (Suzanne Fletcher) as Driver's featurette *You Are Not I*, but almost none of the narrative momentum which sharpened the earlier film to a prickly point. Opting for poetry over prose and mood over logic, *Sleepwalk* fashions a luminous, original and very contemporary night city out of a curious dispersal of spare parts: a vain French woman suddenly losing all her hair, an executive barking on the street, unmanned copying machines assuming a life of their own, vanishing fingers and documents. Insofar as it uses plot almost

exclusively as a pretext for producing images, sounds and characters, it seems to have little hope of US distribution, despite a Georges Sadoul prize and Mannheim award already under its belt.

Along with Leandro Katz's *The Visit* (half an hour of metaphysical paranoia which more or less does for Manhattan what Welles' *The Trial* did for Zagreb) and Tian Zhuang Zhuang's *The Horse Thief* (a beautiful mainland Chinese spectacle of Tibetan death ceremonies and the cold cruelty of landscapes that evokes *The Savage Innocents* and early Paradjanov), *Sleepwalk* carries a charge that is above all visceral, largely through the musical modulations of the lighting.

Raul Ruiz' *Mammame* turns a Wellesian rhetoric (wide and low angles, deep focus and shadows) on Jean-Claude Gallotta's spirited dance group, with a camera which seems to change position almost as often as the dancers. Playing with plasticity itself, *Mammame* contrives to make one even more aware of the floor than one is in an Ozu film—perhaps because it usually remains the only fixed anchor to an endlessly mutable overhead space. Brilliantly achieving the maximum out of a minimal assignment, *Mammame* gets by without need of a single subtitle; if there is any justice in the world beyond Rotterdam, audiences should be found for this film in diverse corners across the map.

JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

The Horse Thief.



Carlos Clarens

A tribute to the writer, who died in February

Having his hair catch fire in a restaurant was not, perhaps, an everyday experience in Carlos Clarens' life, but at least his reaction was typical. Leaning too far forward over a picturesquely but not very sensibly placed candle, in his eagerness to establish the niceties of Adele Jergens' filmography, he failed to notice that the fringe of his mop of dark curls had taken flame and was burning merrily. He did not seem unduly surprised when the three nearest people at table started beating him about the head, and once the situation was explained to him looked faintly wistful. 'Ah, what a pity,' he said. 'It must have been just like the forest fire in *Bambi* in there, with all the little creatures running from the conflagration...'

As you might gather, he had to the full the movie buff's demented but often therapeutic ability to turn everything in life into a movie, though monitored by a sharply ironical sense of humour. The first impression Carlos gave was of almost your stereotypical *Weekend in Havana* Cuban: sparkling eyes, gleaming teeth in a ready smile, talking a mile a minute in perfect English with a fetching Desi Arnaz sort of lilt. But it seldom took long to penetrate that particular protective colouring and meet the serious

(though never solemn), subtle, intricately cultured person who cohabited the same body as the mad moppet.

In fact, though born in Cuba (in 1930) and brought up in Havana, he was of French, Spanish and largely Sephardic background. He was educated at the Sorbonne, and lived all over the place, though probably more in Paris and New York than anywhere else. He seemed, rather mysteriously, to know everybody, in a far wider context than just the cinema. But the main mystery, in this least secretive of men, was where and how, precisely, he acquired the ability to express himself in English of a clarity and elegance beyond the reach of most full-time English or American writers. Not that it necessarily came easily: he would drive his publishers crazy with his intransigent perfectionism. Whereas most of us tend to add and elaborate on second thoughts, he would constantly seek to cut, clarify, condense, so that the first text of the major books on *Horror Movies* (1967-68) and *Crime Movies* (1980), as well as smaller works like his elegant appreciation of *George Cukor* (1976), was almost always much longer than the last.

He wrote a good deal for *SIGHT AND SOUND*, *Film Comment* and other magazines; but his absolute refusal of anything even faintly slapdash was no doubt the reason why he did not write much more. And then, he was, up to the early 1980s, always on the move. Whether because he had a temperament of one of nature's gypsies, or because he spent years trying this way and that to get his aged mother out of Cuba (a wish eventually gratified), or because his chronic asthma, which finally, shatteringly struck him down, made it difficult for him to stay in any changeable climate for very long, it was hard to fathom. Too much of the time, no doubt, he spent playing the role he plays in Agnès Varda's *Lions Love*: the mercurial fixer, arranger, always ready to help and with no apparent life of his own.

All the same, he did find time also to work with maximum efficiency on exhibitions like MOMA's 1978 *Designed for Film*, and in his last few years he had settled to a happy and ordered life in New York running a picture agency, writing, and blossoming as never before. Well, at least when he meets in heaven such of the (few) movie greats he was unfortunate enough to miss on earth, he will recognise them all, be able to tell them things about their careers that even they never knew, and keep them amused throughout eternity.

JOHN RUSSELL TAYLOR

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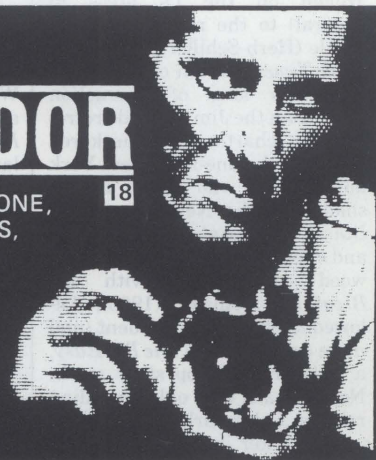
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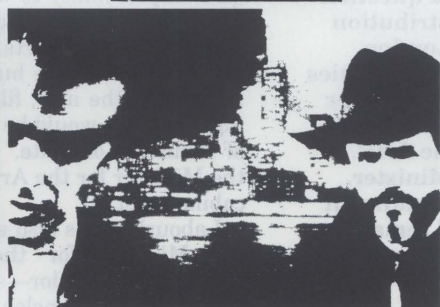
GINGER & FRED 15

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FIRE FESTIVAL 18

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From the Director of
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THE FANTASIST 18

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ISABELLE
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COX's
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EXPLORERS U

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A FILM TO DELIGHT
ANYONE. PLEASE
SEE IT ON THE BIG
SCREEN. YOU WON'T
REGRET IT" Alan Jones



FUTURE FILM POLICY

What are the policies of the main political parties towards the film industry? During the past year, the British Film Institute has been probing for answers. The backbone of this project was a detailed questionnaire compiled by Vincent Porter, then in charge of the BFI's Distribution Division while on secondment from the Polytechnic of Central London. By the end of 1986, the Liberal, Conservative and Social Democratic parties had given 'official' replies. Labour Arts policy, however, was still a matter of some internal disagreement. On Monday, 12 January, after a six-month deferment, Labour reviewed its policy document, 'Charter for the Arts'. The architect of this policy was Norman Buchan, Shadow Arts Minister, who was sacked next day for disagreeing with Neil Kinnock's amendment to the effect that primary responsibility for broadcasting should remain with the Home Office. He was replaced by Mark Fisher, and SIGHT AND SOUND is grateful to him for answering our questions at short notice.

MINISTERIAL RESPONSIBILITY?

One fundamental question was: 'If you were elected to power in the next general election, would you make any changes in the ministerial responsibilities related to film matters?' The Conservatives favoured the *status quo*, arguing that the present allocation of ministerial responsibilities between the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the Home Secretary and the Minister for the Arts 'recognises the commercial, public interest and cultural aspects of film policy and permits the interests of the film industry to be taken into account in those Departments whose policies can help free the industry's creative and business skills to realise their full potential.'

The other major parties, however, favour the creation of some form of Ministry for the Arts under whose aegis film would fall. Interestingly, both the

SDP and the Liberals favour bringing broadcasting within its ambit, and this was also the principal recommendation of the recent Eighth Report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Education, Science and the Arts (which has an in-built Tory majority). The SDP policy discussion paper 'The Arts: an Issue of State' says: 'Since the abolition of the Eady Levy and the National Film Finance Corporation, the responsibilities of the Department of Trade and Industry for film are now marginal. It would not therefore be practical to return film to the DTI rather than locating it along with Broadcasting in the new Ministry.'

Replying to the BFI questionnaire, the SDP continues: 'It is axiomatic that the Minister for Arts and Recreation should have Cabinet status given his/her responsibility for broadcasting. The question is how this is to be done. We propose that Arts and Recreation should be the stated responsibility of one of the non-departmental Cabinet Ministers, like the Lord President, the Lord Privy Seal

or the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The Prime Minister would give responsibility to whichever of these Ministers was himself/herself deeply interested in the arts. The day to day management of the budget for administration for the arts, film and broadcasting and sport would be the responsibility of Ministers of State.' (Note: at present the Minister for the Arts occupies a non-cabinet post.)

Labour's plans also appear to relegate the Minister for the Arts to non-cabinet—and junior—status. It also remains rather unclear just *how* the responsibility for broadcasting is to be shared by the new Ministry on the one hand, and the Home Office and the DTI on the other. (That, however, is beyond the scope of this enquiry.) According to Mark Fisher: 'We intend to bring the whole of the film industry, and indeed broadcasting, under one Ministry, the Ministry for Arts and Media. The rationale behind this is that the traditional Arts Ministry, the Office of Arts and Libraries, does not reflect the wide range of arts and cultural interests within the country. Moreover, the relationships between film and television, and especially the new technologies of cable, satellite and community radio and television, make much better sense if their provision is co-ordinated with that of the performing arts.'

EXHIBITION

What role (if any) has the government to play in keeping cinemas open, and how might that be achieved? The Conserva-

tive answer notes the high closure rate with concern and relates this to 'changing public leisure patterns as well as failure by some managements to modernise and move with changing market needs.' It mentions, as moves to try to slow this decline, the abolition of the Eady Levy, screen quota system and Films Act licensing, and also draws attention to the positive efforts of the BFI in the art-house sector. 'However,' it concludes, 'the Government do not believe that public subsidy should be used to maintain the *commercial* cinema business, which should be based on the public's demand for this type of entertainment. The continued decline of cinemas in the future is by no means a certainty. The modernisation of many cinemas, plans to build new multi-screen complexes, and the recent upturn in viewing audiences suggest that trends can be altered. The British Film Year campaign, which was about one-third financed by the Government, is an example of an innovative and helpful co-operative effort by the industry to stimulate cinema-going.'

The Liberals believe in a more interventionist role in the exhibition sector. Here the new Arts Ministry and the Regional Arts Associations would play an important part. The document 'The Shaping of Experience', published by the Liberal Arts, Broadcasting and Heritage Panel, states: 'We propose to launch an urgent study, in consultation with all sides of the industry, to consider how the various restrictive practices, including the duopoly in film distribution, can be changed. Barring of cinemas should be outlawed—that is, the protection of cinemas owned by the two major chains by preventing other outlets from screening new releases or other films in demand. This prevents smaller cinemas with alternative policies from developing. This study would also look at ways to assist the construction of new cinemas and the renovation of old ones, and at the onerous bye-laws which prevent pub and café cinemas.'

The SDP's answer to the questionnaire, like that of the Tories, stresses that one reason for the decline in cinema-going is the sheer unattractiveness of cinemas themselves. However, it adds that cinemas, unlike theatres and arts centres, have not benefited from public investment in their refurbishment. 'We would actively encourage local authorities, especially in the regions outside London, to help refurbish ageing cinemas. With imaginative use of planning gain, economic development funds and youth training schemes, the cost to local authorities need not be large. Practice has shown in the performing and the visual arts that a challenge fund held nationally or regionally can be an important lever for municipal action and we would not be averse to a time limited challenge programme of this kind.'

The declining exhibition sector especially concerns Labour's Mark Fisher. He sees the solution in Labour's essentially devolutionist, regionally based Arts policy. 'Of course Government has not only a role but a responsibility to ensure that the exhibition side of the film industry is not only maintained but expanded. We envisage a pluralist approach to solving the problem. There may well be a role for local authorities and Regional Arts Associations and there will most certainly be an opportunity to expand considerably the network of Regional Film Theatres. We will also be looking at the possibility of helping other independent exhibitors in areas where exhibition is very limited. The truth is that for most people the choice of films in the high street cinema in no way reflects the diversity of the film industry and is considerably more limited than the wide range of films available on video. It is yet another example of the "free market" so beloved of the present Government actually *constricting* choice as opposed to widening it. This is most dramatically illustrated by the stranglehold of the two major distribution chains in cinema exhibition. The local authorities will have a key role here, as in all aspects of our Arts and Media policy.'

'A crucial element of this policy will be the statutory requirement for local authorities to produce an Arts Development Plan. This will require them to publish a consultative document on the Arts in their area, go out and consult the local community and then publish a plan. I would certainly expect that process to reveal a distinct need, especially in the rural communities and the regions, for wider film exhibition. There would then be various possibilities: it might be as simple as making greater use of Arts Centres by installing or renovating exhibition equipment, or it

might be more ambitious—like establishing a local authority Regional Film Theatre. But the first step is to look closely at the network of RFTs and to see how it can be expanded.'

It is worth noting that Labour's ideas here draw heavily on the experiences of the Metropolitan Authorities and the GLC, which the Party is committed to restoring. Take, for example, the conclusion of the chapter on film, video, tv and cinema in the GLC-produced booklet 'The State of the Art or the Art of the State?': 'The Council should consider (a) the possibility of setting up a cinema investment fund, to support selective measures of refurbishment and equipment renewal in the independent sector, and (b) the possibility of setting up a single co-ordinated publicity and promotion system for all independent venues in London.'

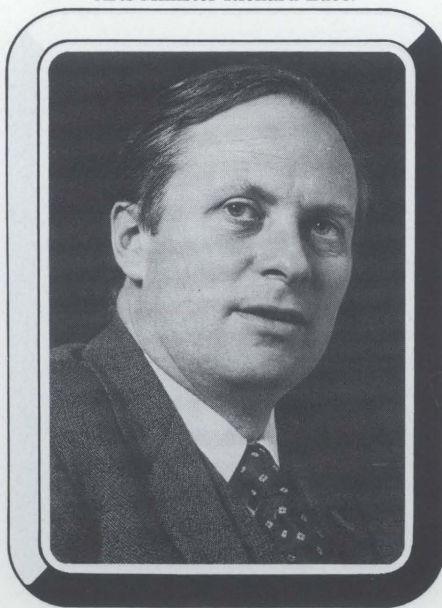
PRODUCTION

In the field of film production, should there be any changes in the relationships between the television organisations and the film industry, given the pioneering examples of Film on Four and similar European models? Not surprisingly, the Tory answer echoes Professor Peacock's suggestion that both the BBC and ITV should take more work from the independent sector. 'The success of Channel 4's operations, coupled with other factors, has and will continue to have an effect on the BBC and ITV companies. The BBC is increasingly looking to co-operate with outside financial and creative sources, and is actively developing its co-production arrangements both with overseas broadcasting bodies and more recently with UK independents. The ITV companies are increasingly co-operating with independent producers and in a number of cases have developed their own film-making subsidiaries. We believe that the development of new media, including cable and DBS services... will create yet further opportunities for the independent production sector.'

The Liberals, too, recommend the extension of the Channel 4 arrangements. In their document 'The Shaping of Experience', they stress: 'We would seek to end the harmful division between films made for tv and for the cinema: no tv film should actually be banned from the cinema; and we would look at ways to increase the comparatively small sums that currently tv pays for films.'

Those who remember Dr David Owen's early endorsement of a greater role for the independents will not be surprised to find the SDP stating: 'We would urge such changes in the BBC as are necessary to permit joint projects with independent producers aimed at the twin markets of cinema and television exhibition.' The

Arts Minister Richard Luce.



SDP also use the matter of the growing interdependence of film and television to support a levy on films shown on television, the money so raised helping to finance new British films. Taking their cue from David Puttnam's remark that 'Cinemas are beginning to take their final step as a commercial enterprise, becoming what is in effect a promotional vehicle for film whose actual pay-off will be cable, cassette, satellite and off-air broadcasting,' they argue, 'It seems unjust, in that context, that film-makers have not been able to benefit from the home box office.' They propose the levy as a remedy.

During the passage of the Films Bill, the question of the levy gave the Government its most difficult moments. Indeed, at committee stage, an amendment proposing just such a levy was actually passed and was supported by several Tory MPs (it was, of course, defeated at the third reading). In the House, one of the measure's strongest Tory supporters was John Gorst, who said during the Bill's second reading on 19 November 1984: 'It is necessary that we return to this matter again and again. In equity and in practice, a levy on the viewing of films shown on television would seem to be the solution in financing full-length British commercial films. For acceptance of this proposition it is necessary to disabuse our minds of the specious arguments about licence fees increasing by leaps and bounds. It is necessary also to ignore the siren voices of the copper-bottomed television moguls and magnates. It is equally necessary for the Government to get away from the idea that we can apply the rules, theories and dogmas of monetarism and free markets to an industry which is one in name but not in reality.' Interestingly, those Tory proponents of the levy to whom I spoke while researching this article (Tim Brinton and Jeremy Hanley) remained undaunted by their parliamentary defeat and supported the need for such a measure as strongly as ever.

INVESTMENT AND ARTS FUNDING

The vexed question of the levy—one of the few to throw up much in the way of intra-party debate—brings us to the central issue of financial incentives for investment in film production. It is here that the differences between the parties can be seen most acutely. The Tory policy can be summed up as non-interventionist. As the 1984 White Paper, 'Film Policy,' put it, 'The Government intends to shift its approach to the film industry away from the statutory intervention of the last 30 years and towards the creation of the right business environment.' That is, one in which

creative talents and business skills are allowed to flourish, *pace* John Gorst, in a free-market environment.

The Arts Minister, Richard Luce, expanded on this point in October 1986 at the BFI symposium 'Film and Television: A European Partnership?' 'In general, in the UK we have taken the line that deregulation rather than overprotection is the way to encourage growth in this industry, as in others . . . The pace and unpredictability of the changes to come add to the arguments for governments to "enable" rather than "dictate", and to lubricate markets rather than embed them in cotton wool. Consumer tastes and commercial responses tend to move faster than political punditry and the bureaucrat's pen.' The Conservatives replied in a similar spirit to the BFI questionnaire: 'The Government does not accept that the commercial film industry needs wholesale subsidies,' thus rejecting any idea of a redistributive levy within the audiovisual sector, changes in regulations, or any other kind of fiscal measures. 'However,' they continue, 'the Government recognises that there are difficulties in some specific parts of the commercial film market, and has made arrangements to tackle them.'

These revolve mainly around the British Screen Finance Consortium, successor to the National Film Finance Corporation, which the Government is committed to funding at an annual rate of £1.5m for the next five years. A further £850,000 a year is contributed by the Consortium's private sector participants, while £600,000 a year is expected under contractual rights from the NFFC's support for many hundreds of films since 1949. The Government also hopes that British Screen will attract additional sources of risk capital.

British Screen will play a major role in three areas, according to the Conserva-

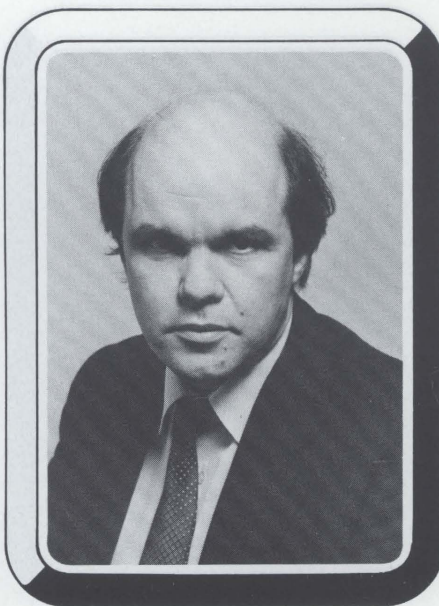
tives. First, the funding of low and medium-budget films which use new talent and which might find it hard to raise finance from more conventional commercial sources. Secondly, the work previously carried out by the NFFC's subsidiary, the National Film Development Fund, namely providing the 'funding to develop film projects, in particular the securing of options on literary works, preparing scripts, the assembly of the nucleus of production teams, and the legal, financial and administrative work necessary to prepare properly costed business plans for prospective financiers to consider.' Thirdly, the BSFC will administer a Government-funded short film support scheme aimed at protecting an important forcing ground for new talent in the wake of the abolition of the incentive of the Eady Levy.

This section of the Conservative response ends: 'Moving away from the commercial side of the industry, the Government fully accepts the need to support the artistic, cultural and training aspects of film and television. The Office of Arts and Libraries makes substantial grants to support the British Film Institute and the National Film and Television School. The Scottish and Welsh Offices make a number of equivalent or complementary arrangements in those countries.'

The SDP favours a distinctly more interventionist approach and relates the crisis of the film industry to a wider crisis of funding the arts. The party endorses the notion of a British Film Authority of the kind proposed by the 1974-79 Labour Government (and also previous Labour administrations, thanks to the efforts of Harold Wilson). They state: 'The present "crisis" in the arts is largely a crisis in finance. There are simply insufficient funds within the financing system from all sources: box office, sponsorship, private giving and public grant. Solving that crisis presents a dilemma. The arts are a business with social objectives. They cannot simply mark up their prices and still maintain access to all. Neither can they assume that any government can easily promise a steadily rising escalator of public investment. Our arts policy will advance a substantial programme of reform and new initiatives, the central object of which will be to encourage an expansion of resources by a pluralist and participative approach which buttresses the Arts Grant system with tax incentives and other legislative and fiscal measures.'

'Our programme will address the particular needs of the film industry in two ways. First, we shall, at the least, increase the Government's share in investment in the British Screen Finance Consortium. At an early opportunity we will review whether this particular arrangement for providing mixed public and private investment for film is either effective or sufficient. Second, we shall

Mark Fisher, Labour's Arts spokesman.



introduce a number of new measures to increase private investment, including tax breaks for private individuals, the formation of an investment Artsbank, and extensions to the Business Expansion Scheme. Some of these initiatives will be financed by levies (including a levy on blank video and audio tapes). We will need to review with the industry whether these particular measures (designed primarily to meet the needs of the performing and visual arts) are sufficient to encourage the scale of investment now required by feature film producers and will be ready to listen to other proposals. In principle we favour the creation of a British Films Authority established as a public investment bank for British film production and the introduction of an advertising levy to finance it.'

As for the role of the BFI, the SDP answer states: 'As a matter of broad principle, we are committed to strengthening the role played by expert bodies such as the BFI in the formulation and implementation of public policy for the arts.' In its Green Paper, 'The Arts: an Issue of State', it draws attention to the 'innovative developments in film and video production that have come from the Regional Film and Video Workshops under special encouragement from the BFI and the Regional Arts Associations. We would give active support to this programme.' And in reply to the questionnaire, it adds: 'We recognise and value the importance of the ACTT agreement in this development. In its next phase we would wish to encourage its extension to other trades unions involved in the film-making process and greater collaboration between the regional television companies and such workshops. Their interaction is essential to a vigorous regional film culture.'

'Our commitment to increasing the share of the Arts Grant allocated to the regions will have a direct impact on film as it will on the other arts. In those nations and regions within the United Kingdom where there is a second language, we regard it as part of a proper cultural policy that the expression of that language through the moving image should be nurtured, if necessary by special measures that help bridge the investment gap between equally high costs of production and more limited markets.'

Returning to the BFI, the SDP welcomes the founding of the Museum of the Moving Image. 'We regard as essential for the purposes of scholarship and public understanding of film and television that access to museum facilities of this kind be extended in time to the regions.' They add, 'It is in our view essential that the Institute's work be supported by a statutory duty to deposit prints in the National Film Archive, as it must be the Institute's duty to provide public access to that archive.' The Green

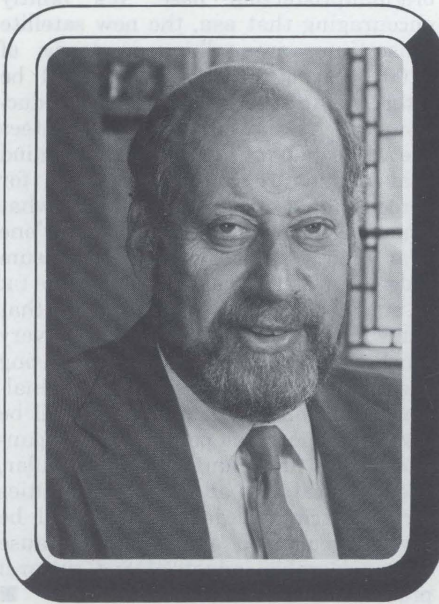
Paper further states: 'We could also provide more resources to the National Film Archive to speed the process of transferring its collection on to safety stock.'

A final point in the SDP policy toward the BFI is elaborated in the section of the Green Paper devoted to the 'cultural quangos', which grouping also includes the BBC and the Arts Council. Here two measures are proposed which 'would both increase the freedom of the cultural quangos and strengthen their accountability. First, we would require nominations to their governing bodies to be subject to approval by an All-Party Standing Committee of Parliament. Secondly, we would require all such institutions to report directly to the same Standing Committee open to public examination.'

The Liberals' ideas on these matters are less developed but find their fullest expression in 'The Shaping of Experience'. 'We propose: (1) To get rid of the British Screen Finance Consortium and resurrect the National Film Finance Corporation, this time funding it adequately. A low-level tax from blank and pre-recorded video cassettes would be raised for this purpose, but it would not be considered a substitute for copyright. An independent Chairman and Chief Executive would be appointed, and representation on the Board would include a broader spectrum of interests than in the past. (2) To re-introduce fiscal incentives for film production, restoring the 100 per cent allowances to encourage increased investment. (3) To give a new priority to training and re-training in film and video techniques, including a higher level of funding to the BFI and a more broadly based financing of film schools.'

Like the other parties, Labour welcomes the Channel 4 film/television

Clement Freud, Liberal/Alliance Arts spokesman.

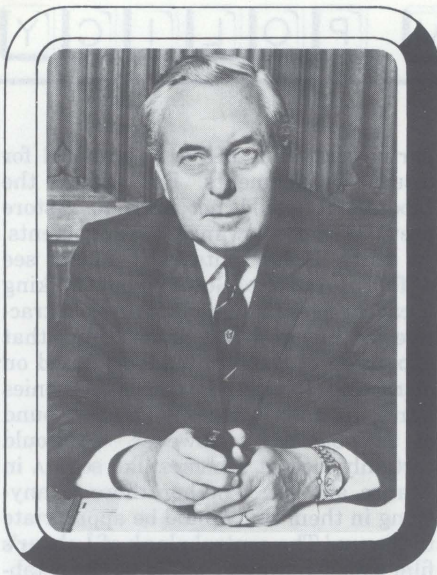


partnership and sees it as a model for future developments. But unlike the Liberals it would not seek to restore previous tax-allowance arrangements. As Mark Fisher puts it, 'I do not see a future Labour Government making fiscal changes to make Britain an attractive tax haven. I just do not think that expansion of the film industry based on attracting foreign or domestic monies purely as a tax write-off is a very sound or sensible base. However, we would certainly look at schemes like SOFICA in France and see whether there is anything in them that would be appropriate to the UK.' The central plank of Labour's film policy, however, would be the establishment of a British Screen Authority, an updated version of the original body proposed by Harold (now Lord) Wilson.

As Fisher explains: 'This would not be exclusively concerned with film production, though this would be at its heart. Previous policies on both sides have tended to see film production as too much of a totality, whereas I believe that slightly different strategies are required for (1) an indigenous industrial base supplying all the production needs of the country as a whole (e.g., training, advertising, the supply of technicians and so on), and (2) the specific needs of a feature film producing industry. In terms of (1), it is of vital importance to maintain and indeed spread the development of our technical skills base. The National Film and Television School is doing an excellent job here, but I'm also very encouraged by ACTT's Jobfit scheme and the expansion of the Workshop sector, especially where local authorities have become involved as in Birmingham and Newcastle. We think they will play an especially wide role in the Local Authority Arts Development Plan, as we expect local consultations to uncover a great demand for more workshops. We think that the contribution of the regions is of paramount importance: the whole thrust of our policy is devolution.'

'It is not only a question of geographical devolution, however; there are also the special interest groups to be considered. As the work of the Minority Arts Advisory Service and other such bodies shows, there is an enormous potential contribution to be made from the black and Asian communities. The reason we think the workshops are so important is that they enable a wider range of people to become involved in film production—non-graduates, black people, and women, for example.'

'When we come on to (2), it is important to realise that, although there will be a production fund as part of the BSA, we do not see its primary purpose as the subsidising or financing of British films aimed at an international market. The experience of Goldcrest's big budget, internationally oriented projects shows that this would be a very insecure way of approaching the revitalisation of the



Lord Wilson, creator of the NFFC, chairman of the British Screen Advisory Council.

Scala and *Ai No Corrida* from the Everyman), Fisher says, 'Our policy is both expansionist and liberal—we do not want to restrict and censor the means of expression. What will characterise the next Labour Government's cultural industries policy will be a desire to see a greater range of choices for the public. A liberal base is the essential ingredient in our policy: we want to ensure that there is the widest possible access to the means of expression and we want the Arts, both subsidised and commercial, to reach a far wider audience than they do at the moment.'

NEW TECHNOLOGY

Our final question asked: 'Do you have any further proposals for reform not covered by the areas outlined above?' Only the Labour Party chose to answer in any significant detail and it chose to address the question of the new technologies and their possible influence on the film industry. In fairness, however, it should be pointed out that the Liberal document, 'The Shaping of Experience', devotes several pages to the new technologies, although it does not relate them specifically to the film industry and thus falls outside the present enquiry. Similarly, the SDP response mentions the challenge of the new technologies but fails to rise above the level of generalities.

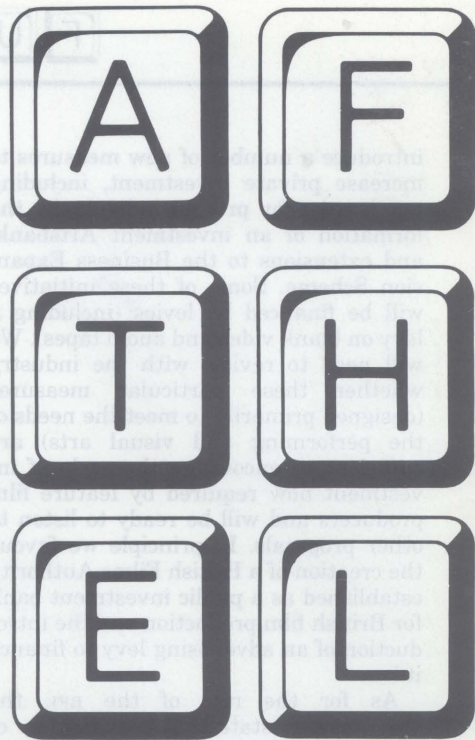
So to return to Mark Fisher, and to close with a look into the future well beyond the next election: 'The way in which satellite develops over the next ten years will be crucial to the British film industry. I'm anxious to get a European agreement on indigenous quotas, but this will be hugely weakened if it does not include some kind of agreement on percentages of original production. I'm extremely concerned that Sky channel has such a low, almost non-existent, original-production base. It's faintly encouraging that BSB, the new satellite consortium, are talking in terms of £100-140m of production, but I'll be interested to see what form that production will take and what guarantees they'll be making. If you bear in mind that this figure covers production for three channels and compare it with what Channel 4 spends on production for one year (£80-90m), it's a very small sum indeed—even if it was *all* spent in the UK on sustaining creative talent. I hope that BSB will meet its production targets very quickly and, better still, consider raising them. If we do not have a strong original-production base in satellite, we will be losing an enormous potential for expansion in the film industry. In particular, the technical base and the opportunities for research and development will be severely curtailed and that will cause us considerable industrial and cultural problems in the future.'

industry. The next Labour Government will be more interested in establishing, partly through Channel 4, partly through the BSA, a wider production base. We will be looking at things like matching funds, investment in pre-production and so on, especially in the area of the low-budget film, those which cost under £2m. We need to ensure a steady supply of films like these. The bigger budget, internationally oriented films, if they come along, will be a welcome means of expansion but the existence and future of the industry won't be dependent on them.'

CENSORSHIP

On the question of both film and video censorship, the Conservatives see no reason for change. The Liberals, on the other hand, would abolish the Video Recordings Act: 'Although we suggest no immediate change to the British Board of Film Classification, we will want to reduce censorship, not increase it.' The Social Democrats argue that it is 'almost certainly too early to evaluate the effects of the Video Recordings Act.' But, they continue, 'As in the structure of film financing, so in regulation, the new arrangements represent an uneasy compromise of self-determination by the industry and statutory intervention by government. We would question whether the interests of both the industry and the public might not be better served by a strong statutory body with a right of judicial appeal.'

The question of the openness of the censorship process is taken up by Mark Fisher (who, incidentally, once produced a film, *Sense or Nonsense*, about the furore over the banning of Joseph Strick's *Ulysses*): 'There is room for much greater accountability and openness about the way in which decisions are arrived at in this area and we would certainly look very favourably on any proposals to open up the whole system to public scrutiny.' Referring critically to the banning of non-certified films by certain Labour councils (for example, in London, Camden banned *Salò* from the



Michael Tracey & David Docherty consider the future of the BBC

In 1972, on 3 November to be exact, the BBC celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. It did so in grand style with an impressive dinner at the Guildhall. Dress was white tie and tails and the assembly constituted a classic exposition of the great and good of the land. The main speaker was the then Prime Minister, Edward Heath. *The Times* published a glowing editorial. Ten years later, on the sixtieth anniversary, the corporation decided it would be appropriate if they marked the occasion by providing a moment for the great and good to thank the Lord for bestowing this mighty institution on them and the common folk. The place was St Paul's Cathedral. The Royals were all there, but the Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, was not. On the morning of the service, she sent a message saying that she was terribly sorry but she wouldn't be able to make it. In her absence lay something of considerable interest and importance.

In the ten years which had passed since the Guildhall dinner, the whole position of the BBC had been changed, largely by events and forces beyond its walls. The Guildhall dinner might be seen by historians as the last hurrah of the old system, the last visible evidence of what was once a mighty institution now cut down by a conspiracy of shifting ideology, the erosion of traditional commitments and the birth of new technologies which shoved aside the public broadcasters' claim in the public interest

TELEVISION

to the guardianship of a scarce resource, the radio spectrum. The PM's absence from the cathedral service was the first real sign of a new age in which the significance and importance of the BBC would be utterly, possibly terminally, diminished.

Perhaps it is, as Mao said of the French Revolution, too early to say yet what the real implications of those changes are. It does look, however, as if we shall really begin to see the truth of the BBC's future after the next election. What happens then depends in part on who is elected. It also depends, however, on everything that has happened in the past five or ten years, not just to the BBC, not even to television, but to the whole of British culture and society.

Three or four years ago, a widely shared expectation was that the ravages of cable and satellite would lay waste the *status quo*, and in particular the BBC. It was never likely that the new communications technologies would develop as rapidly or on anything like the scale which had been suggested. What they did do, to a quite extraordinary extent, was pave the way for an enormous ideological challenge to the core principles on which the BBC in the first instance, and the rest of British broadcasting afterwards, had been established. The layers of that ideological challenge are many and point to the available options for the future of the BBC.

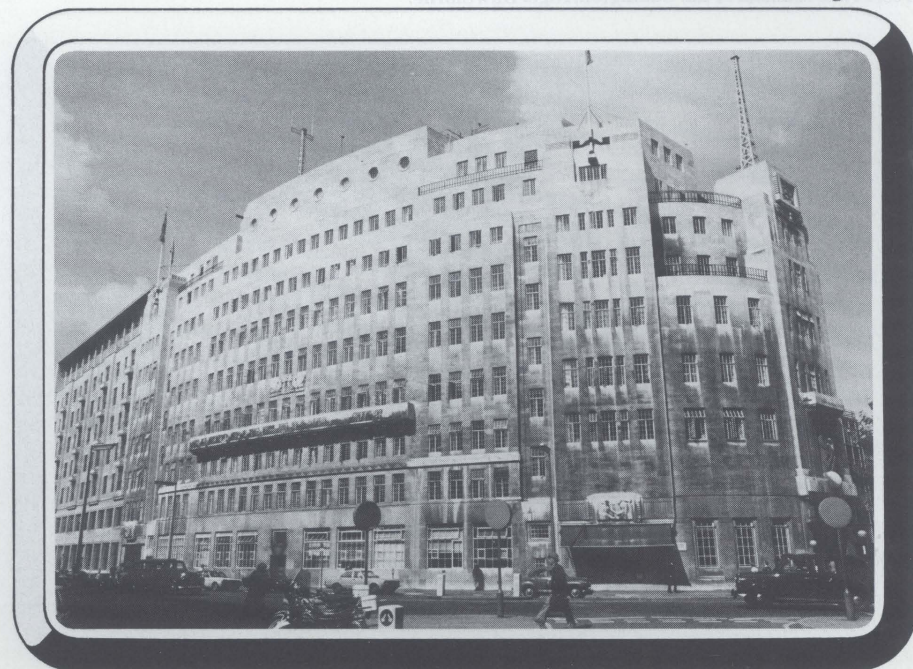
They involve the issue of social justice and the licence fee, whether it is right that the poor man pays the same charge as the rich man; the disposition of the Prime Minister and her colleagues to tend not to like public corporations; the traditional disdain of politicians for the BBC in particular; a feeling that perhaps the BBC is overlarge, has expanded too

much, is mismanaged, while retaining all that arrogance born of an age and position in which it did stand tall in the land; a shadow cast inevitably by the success of Channel 4 and particularly by the way in which it commissions rather than makes programmes; a simple problem of economics in an industry where for reasons which remain mysterious costs rise faster, much faster, than the general level of inflation; a drying up of the spring of increased revenue fed by more and more people obtaining colour tv sets and therefore, for the most part, colour licences; the universal reluctance of all governments to increase the licence fee; the real problems of finding alternative ways of paying for the licence fee;

the generally uncreative environment in which broadcasting now finds itself, thereby diminishing in turn the ability of public broadcasting to point to its creativity as evidence of its worth; errors of judgment within the BBC, and an ever widening gulf between the management and the Board of Governors; and finally the apparent decline of widespread support for public culture within Britain which would inevitably affect an institution which certainly in its rhetoric, and sometimes in its practice, sought to engage with that culture.

This last point is the most significant. It implies the diminished role of a coherent, binding, consensual value and moral structure within British life. The

Broadcasting House.



BBC is above all else—or was and should be—an idea about how broadcast culture should be done. It presupposes ideological clarity and commitment—in everything from its broadest notions of excellence and range, across to its specific commitment to impartiality and its need to nurture political democracy. It assumes that there are certain choices which can and should be made about the development of a culture—used here in both its aesthetic, cerebral form and in its social aggregate form—which rest on the notion that such culture is greater than just an aggregate of individual choices, and that the function of public service broadcasting is to provide a context within which moments of grace and excellence will happen as a matter of course rather than as an occasional creative spasm.

Much of the criticism of the BBC after 1979 focused on the Corporation's apparent desire to be into everything: the BBC seemed to have become something like the selfish gene, motivated by the pursuit not of wider purpose but of particular survival. An obvious facet of this is the way in which the BBC came to protect itself by expanding into new areas almost as a matter of course, with no obvious rationale in terms of public service broadcasting. The venture into local radio in the 1960s was one such example, motivated not by the putting into operation of some dearly held definition of public service purpose, but by a desire to make a pre-emptive strike against commercial radio. More recently, the annihilation of Peter Jay's breakfast dreaming had all the hallmarks of an institutional mugging rather than the serving of any broader intellectual, cultural or social purpose. The initial venture into DBS was one form of empire-

building which quite literally failed to get off the ground. More practically, such scheduling and programming ventures as the *Wogan* show and *East-Enders* have the very same traits of tactical manoeuvring to shore up the institution. Their relationship to any clear definition of in what sense the BBC is a public service broadcasting organisation remains at best unclear.

As the election approaches, a number of questions are asked of the future of the BBC: what should it be doing; how should it be funded; is it too big, too arrogant, too incompetent; does it know where it is going; where do we want it to go; why do we need it; how can we keep it and get rid of the licence fee; how can it hope to cope with a new media environment; will not the marriage of market and technology open up a choice of programming unthinkable ten or fifteen years ago, a choice which anyhow makes the BBC redundant?

Why is the debate about the future of the BBC, and by extension the future of public service broadcasting in Britain, taking place now with such passion? It is partly an illusion in the sense that there have always been passionate debates about broadcasting, particularly in those bitter moments when politicians get terribly upset at their treatment and can do little more than shout and shake their fists at the nefarious beast of Portland Place. The difference now is that the passion is not about particular practices, but about the continued existence of the Corporation itself. That, in effect, is what will be decided after the election.

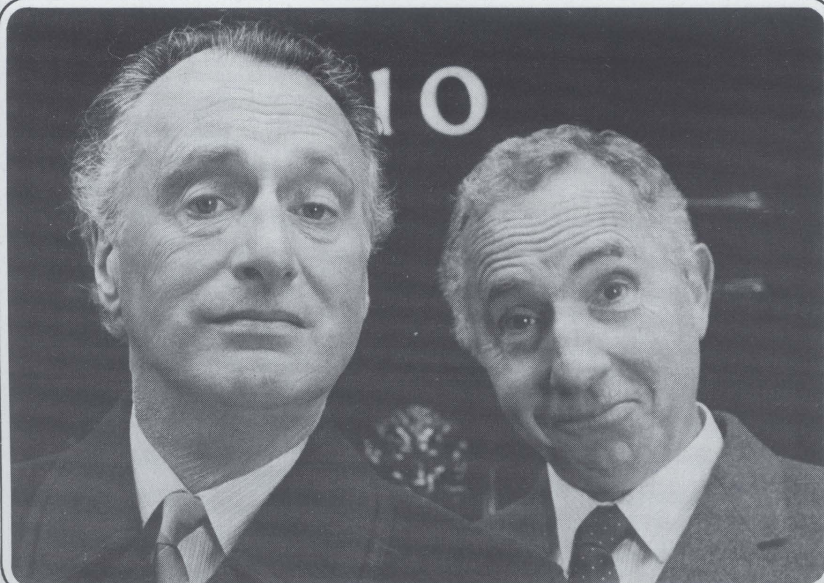
Many of the specific questions which will have to be asked after the election have been set up by the Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC (the Peacock

Committee, after its radical-liberal-economist chairman, Professor Alan Peacock), which was published in July 1986. One central issue which the Committee had been asked to address was whether the BBC should be made to take advertising. The Committee was quite clear: 'BBC television should not be obliged to finance its operations by advertising while the present organisation and regulation of broadcasting remain in being.' They added that the fee 'should be indexed on an annual basis to the general rate of inflation.' The majority of the Committee favoured the privatisation of BBC radios 1 and 2 and local radio 'in whole or in part'. On the key issue of TV advertising it might appear that the BBC had been relieved. Not at all, since underlying the intellectual basis of the Report was a commitment to 'consumer sovereignty'. The Report ends: 'If we had to summarise our conclusion by one slogan . . . it would be direct consumer choice rather than continuation of the licence fee' (Para 711).

The Committee in effect sent the BBC back to death row to wait ten years more before the terminal date. 'The true friend of "public service" programmes will realise that the present system for supporting them is unlikely to last far into the 1990s and that they will require for their future sustenance a combination of moves to a genuine consumer market and some direct support from the public purse' (Para 591). They add in the next paragraph: 'Our own conclusion is that British broadcasting should move towards a sophisticated market system based on consumer sovereignty. That is a system which recognises that viewers and listeners are the best ultimate judges of their own interests, which they can best satisfy if they have the option of purchasing the broadcasting service they require from as many alternative sources of supply as possible. There will always be a need to supplement the direct consumer market by public finance for programmes of a public service kind supported by people in their capacity as citizens and voters but unlikely to be commercially self-supporting in the view of broadcasting entrepreneurs.'

They envisage that condition of consumer sovereignty as evolving in three stages. First, satellite and cable develop, but most viewers and listeners continue to rely on BBC, ITV and independent local radio. The existing forms of financing remain, though the licence fee is index-linked to the retail price index. Secondly, broadcasting channels proliferate, the BBC encrypts its signals and viewers pay a subscription fee to the Corporation for the bulk of its programme services, though other BBC programming might be advertiser-supported. Other TV services via cable and satellite will be available through different forms of finance. The third stage is a multiplicity of programme outlets and the possibility of

Yes, Prime Minister: Paul Eddington, Nigel Hawthorne.



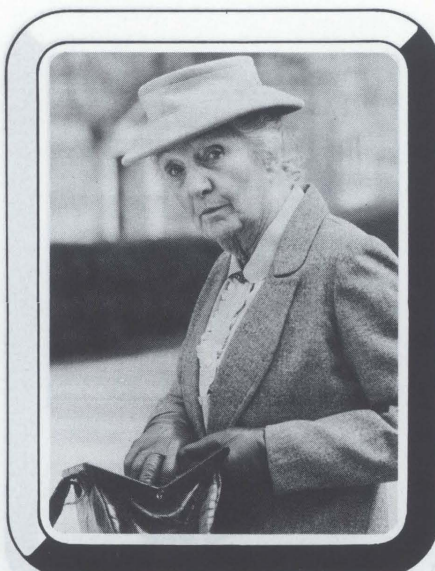
AFTER THE ELECTION

the viewers paying individually for programmes and programme packages. At each stage there is a public service provision, organised from stage two onwards by a Public Service Broadcasting Council, which ensures that all those programmes which 'should' be made, but won't be if consumer sovereignty alone prevails, will be made.

As a result of the Report the government has introduced a Green Paper on the future of radio, and an interdepartmental committee, under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister, is discussing the future of television. While the Green Paper leaves the BBC radio services relatively unscathed, it does provide for quasi-deregulated commercial national and local radio services. The interdepartmental committee is understood to be giving active consideration to the use of subscription to fund the BBC.

What then are the options for the BBC in a post-election period? The first option is the least likely, it is simply to maintain the *status quo*. In this option the British viewer continues to pay a licence to watch TV; the government increases the level of the licence to allow for inflation; and the Corporation keeps close tabs on its 'other' sources of revenue so as not to infringe the integrity of the licence. The BBC carries on, basically unchanged, into a distant future, with public service values still echoing down its corridors and the thoughts of its founder, Reith, still hissing like radio waves from the edge of the known universe: 'Maintenance of high standards, the provision of the best and the rejection of the hurtful.' Against this, however, must be placed the fact that even the more reserved observers of the new media scene do not deny that eventually, perhaps over 10, 15 or 20 years, cable and satellite services will have begun to eat into the BBC's share of the national audience and slowly undermine the credibility of the licence fee. Before that, however, comes either the profound ideological challenge of the Conservatives to the BBC's continuity, or the muddled efforts of the opposition parties who nod in the direction both of the traditional, almost clichéd, glories of the BBC and the fruits of the new age of communication.

During the long postwar political consensus, successive technical developments in broadcasting did not pose any real political difficulties. The BBC was itself modelled on nineteenth century ideals of public and civil service, and fitted each party's political image. Labour's public corporation ideals, the Conservatives' one nation philosophy and the Liberals' feelings about public service were accommodated by the BBC. Although each of the parties had bitter fights with the management of the BBC, these fights tended to be directed at specific personalities rather than the organisation: governments made the odd



Miss Marple, Joan Hickson.

rumbling noise about changing the management structure, but no party wanted to dismember the BBC, regardless of how much they wanted the Director-General's head. However, much of the pressure on the BBC has emerged since the Estate Agents' revolt in the Conservative party between 1979 and 1983.

Tory backbenchers seemed motivated by a powerful if mainly ignorant desire to see off the BBC, that most visible symbol of a public culture which was the antithesis of their beloved Thatcherism's commitment to private being. In *The Times* of 27 November 1985, the Conservative MP Tom Hooson wrote: 'If one cuts through the BBC's idealised view of itself, what actually exists is a badly managed, over-staffed and over-extended empire, as much in need of

pruning as were British Steel, British Leyland and the NCB.'

In a debate in the House of Commons on 19 December 1985, another Conservative, Robert Jones, described the proposed increase in the licence to £65 as a 'whopping increase for anyone who is living on a restricted budget due to a fixed income.' He added that with a declining share of the audience due to competition there 'are bound to be questions about the legitimacy of the base for a compulsory tax, such as the BBC licence fee.' Another Tory, Francis Maude, in the same debate, said that 'since the beginning of broadcasting there has been a liberal consensus that we have to maintain the purity and virginity of the public service broadcasting ethic. Any mention of advertising in connection with the BBC somehow signals the advance of the Visigoths across Europe. The fragile structure of civilisation totters and is close to crumbling at the very mention of the word.' Another Tory, Michael Forsyth, argued that the 'time had come to think about radical action in terms of commercialising the BBC... Auntie is in desperate need of surgery. BBC1, BBC2 and breakfast TV could be hived off as a separate company. The Board of Governors of the BBC should be turned into a sort of IBA... That entity could then be funded entirely by advertising without any difficulty' (Hansard clm 485, 19.12.85).

Using the terminology of the new economics, Forsyth said that BBC local radio 'should be privatised, preferably through management buy-outs, or simply by the highest bidder taking all.' In a fascinating aside, Christopher Chope pointed out that 'It is significant that all those who have spoken in the debate so far are new Members of

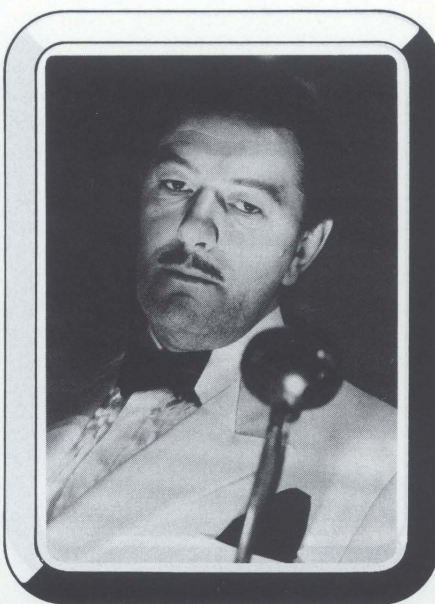
Hotel du Lac: Anna Massey, Patricia Hodge.



Parliament. They represent the new thinking among the public on this issue.' This really was a significant point, a new breed of Tory MP, radical, non-deferential, certainly against paternalism, willing to use any and every argument, including the social justice ones about the plight of OAPS, willing to think about the future of the BBC in ways no previous generation had done.

Piers Marchant, Tory MP for Newcastle Central, summed up their views: 'Paternalism in broadcasting might have been satisfactory in the 1920s, during the war years and perhaps in the austerity that immediately followed the war. The spirit of today's age revolts against paternalism, monopoly, duopoly and everything that goes with them... in the interests of plurality, quality and choice there should be a major review of the licence system, the funding of the BBC and its structure.' Against the libertarian tendency within the Party stands the more patrician element, which hears what is being said but worries that it would take television down avenues of political and moral excess which would be unacceptable.

After years of complaining about Establishment bias and Oxbridge domination, the Labour Party are trapped defending the BBC. The curious thing is that in the short term they would gain from the introduction of more independent production into the BBC. Many in the Independent field lean to the Left, but the Labour Party simply cannot escape its centralist tendencies. A strong, centralised organisation always looks better to a Labour Party person, despite the fact that decentralisation, independent production, and the liberalisation of broadcasting regulations might benefit the Party.



The Singing Detective: Michael Gambon.

As befits the Alliance, they want to adopt a tough and tender approach. On the one hand, they want to stop any licence fee increase, and introduce fiscal discipline into the BBC, but on the other, they want to encourage the continuation of the BBC's public service tradition.

Each of these confused philosophies of broadcasting spills over into the parties' image of the BBC. The election concerns three main issues: finance, changes in the BBC services, and regulation.

Finance: The Conservatives will not let the BBC off the hook. Having failed with advertising, they are now looking into the feasibility of making the BBC a subscription service. The idea is deceptively simple; the BBC's signal is scrambled and then decoded by a set-top

converter, and a fee will be paid directly to the BBC for the signal. According to Douglas Hurd, the Home Secretary, subscription will be a natural extension of present financial arrangements; in effect, an electronic licence fee. Speaking in the same debate, Leon Brittan, who set up the Peacock Inquiry: 'The BBC should be self-confident enough to be prepared to face its public and sell itself.' The idea has some support within the BBC itself; it will be easy to collect, difficult to evade, and will cut out the Post Office collection fees (which are ridiculously high at 17 per cent of revenue). Those who support the idea seem unaware of its dangers.

Although the technical problems of scrambling have been resolved, no one has yet tried to run a subscription system for 20 million households. Even Home Box Office (HBO), the most successful US subscription service, only has 13 million subscribers. Furthermore, the BBC will be unlike any other service offered. Most subscription services come in a package, with Movies, Sport, News channels separate, or with other general entertainment channels. BBC1 and 2 will be the only channels on offer on this new service, and everyone will still be able to pick up ITV and Channel 4.

Another complicating factor is that by the time subscription becomes technically possible, Direct Broadcast by Satellite (DBS) will have been up and running for several years. The French and German satellites, TDF-1 and TV-Sat, are due to go up toward the end of 1987; the television dedicated medium-powered SES satellite, Astra, which will probably have all the main pan-European TV channels on it, will go up in February 1988. Finally, BSB, the British DBS franchise-holders, will be broadcasting in 1990-91; for the price of a movie subscription service, BSB will offer a 24-hour news channel (run jointly with ITN), a sports channel, and a children's channel. In other words, by the time the BBC can be encrypted, viewers will be offered a massive range of advertiser- and subscription-supported services. The point of taking the BBC may escape many in this new age.

Even if the BBC proves a viable subscription service, the idea will still be wrong. The licence fee ties BBC and ITV together; it is the cornerstone of the system. If the licence fee goes, and the BBC is simply a service to consumers, and not a service to the public, then ITV will cease to be part of the public service package. ITV will be under great strain anyway with other advertiser-supported services in the market, and if it begins to compete with Sky and its successors, rather than the BBC, then the system will be in deep trouble.

The Conservatives are caught; they do not want the licence fee to carry on increasing (indeed they will be indexing it to the wholly inappropriate retail price index after 1988), and yet they do

After Pilkington: Miranda Richardson, Bob Peck.



not want consumers completely to dictate the market. Consumers have the unhappy knack of wanting things that are not good for them. The Conservatives have yet to find a way of resolving this problem.

Labour have come out against subscription. In the Commons debate about Peacock, Gerald Kaufman, Labour's Shadow Home Secretary, claimed: 'The subscription base is unreliable.' As a consequence of subscription, 'the BBC would then become exactly what the Government wants it to be—a marginal provider of minority programmes, subordinated to the commercial giants . . . what is more, the regime proposed by the Peacock report for our ultimate broadcasting structure would lack any regulation or controls . . . the same big business political bias that prevails in most of the press would become the rule on television and radio.'

This last statement gives the clue to Labour's real worries. They are constantly talking about future television channels being the electronic equivalents of the *Sun* or the *Star*; and as they are more worried by the political leanings of these papers than the *Starbird*, it is probable that what concerns them about the future of television is not sex and censorship, but losing another part of the media. They are worried that even the flawed standards of impartiality which exist in British broadcasting will be compromised if subscription is introduced and the BBC becomes unable to exert any influence. Consistent with its good old-fashioned centralism, the Labour Party wish to escape the problem of the licence fee by paying for the BBC out of direct taxation. In their submission to Peacock, they said: 'Since television is more universally consumed than most other public services such as education or health this does not seem an inappropriate form of finance.' They have no qualms that this would compromise the BBC, and it is highly likely that they will introduce some kind of direct subsidy at the next licence fee renewal period, should they become the government.

Reducing the Service: While there is a great deal of disagreement about the long-term future of the BBC, there is a remarkable amity about one aspect of the Corporation's output. All the parties want the BBC to cut back; in particular, they want it out of breakfast television, and preferably to drop its commitment to mass entertainment programmes. In their submission to Peacock the Liberals said they could see 'no reason why the BBC should seek to compete with commercial radio in chain-smoking pop records, why the BBC should feel compelled to venture into shop-front radio, breakfast television and other areas which can be perfectly well served either by commercial broadcasting channels or

perhaps by local authority radio and television.' Tim Brinton, Chairman of the Conservative Media Committee, recently asked: 'Why should a compulsory tax . . . be levied to finance, for example, *Dallas* and *Dynasty*?' In a recent interview, Brinton suggested that the BBC should be cut back to providing public service broadcasting, leaving the commercial channels to deal with popular entertainment. The Labour Party also claim that 'In recent years [the BBC] has felt itself compelled to enter into competition with commercial television. As a result, it has become overextended, as happened with breakfast television. This has often tended to blur what should be its continuing philosophy of public service.' It will be interesting to see what unofficial strings are attached to the next licence fee increase, or to Labour's promise of tax revenue.

Regulation: Another area of change which will affect the BBC is the Ministry which controls it. It has long been felt by the Liberals that the BBC should be taken out of the Home Office and given to an Arts and Culture Ministry. Clement Freud, the Liberal Spokesman on the Arts, recently claimed: 'It seems to us totally wrong to have a restrictive Ministry looking after a dynamic medium.' He went on: 'Probably as a result of the diversification of ministerial responsibility, there is a sad lack of forward planning' about British television. The SDP propose that much of the responsibility for the BBC should pass from the Home Office to 'a British Broadcasting Standing Tribunal'. The objective of the tribunal would be to avoid any licence fee increases for ten years; it would investigate any claim for a licence increase and suggest where

economies could be made; furthermore, it would have the power to investigate restrictive union practices; finally, it would encourage alternative forms of finance. Norman Buchan, Labour's spokesman on broadcasting during the Peacock Inquiry, was very keen that the BBC be moved out of the 'law and order' ministry, into a Ministry of Culture. In the end Labour settled for a weaker version of this, whereby ministerial responsibility for the BBC remains with the Home Office, but a new Ministry of Arts and Broadcasting will play an advisory role in the formulation of policy.

What exactly might happen to the BBC post-election, is impossible to say. Perhaps the key will lie with the exact nature of the balance of power. If, for example, the Conservatives are returned with a workable majority, one imagines that rather sharp knives will emerge. In that situation, it is difficult to imagine that the BBC will remain intact. If, however, Mr Kinnock obtains a majority, the most likely consequence is a shift away from the licence to a greater dependence on Treasury funding, with all the implications of that, both in terms of demand for retrenchment and tighter political control of editorial content. If the Alliance were to form a government that would indeed be remarkable.

If there is a hung parliament, and horsetrading of policies, the BBC might just be able to sneak away into a rather dark corner with the hope that no one will have the time or inclination to worry too much about something as relatively unimportant as broadcasting. After any subsequent election, the BBC will have to start worrying all over again. ■

Blunt: Anthony Hopkins, Ian Richardson.



Raul Ruiz and



The Surrealist definition of beauty, invoking the chance juxtaposition of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table, could well serve as a recipe for the improbable ingredients that constitute a film by Raul Ruiz. Consider, for example, his recent *Treasure Island*, with its rum crew of Martin Landau, Vic Tayback, Jean-Pierre Léaud, Lou Castel, French pop singer Sheila and Anna Karina, all trapped inside an eerie contemporary re-enactment of Stevenson's mythic tale, shot on Portuguese and African locations, with an English voice-over narration by Chris Marker, and financed by Cannon. Or his current plan to bring together assorted Israeli and American film-makers in a state-funded workshop based at Le Havre (of which more later).

Indeed, it has always been rather too easy to make Ruiz seem unapproachably esoteric: an ingenious *bricoleur* playing the European culture game with something of the same virtuosity and detachment as his fellow Latin American Borges. What is now becoming clearer—at least for those able to keep pace with his prodigious output—is the tracing of certain essentially philosophical concerns through all his varied projects; together with the emergence of a production policy which shrewdly addresses many of the anxieties present in French, and perhaps all European, cinema.

Not that twelve years of hyperactive exile from his native Chile have turned Ruiz into a typical French intellectual, despite the high cultural esteem he enjoys in his adopted country. He notes ironically that, while he has never been popular with a wide public and only occasionally found favour with critics, his unfailing success with the elite of *'les gens qui comptent'* has none the less enabled him to pursue a resolutely eclectic and prolific career.

In fact, the legacy of his early theological studies in Chile, combined with a voracious interest in medieval and modern British analytic philosophy, has helped him resist traditional French cultural insularity. Yet despite the amused detachment with which he views French orthodoxy in everything from cinematography to cooking, he realises that the chances of working in the same way anywhere else—such as the homeland of his revered Stevenson, Chesterton, Russell, et al—would be slim indeed. And during the past year, he has moved from the margins of French culture into a key position which must make him one of *les gens qui comptent*.

Ian Christie

the House of Culture

As co-director of the Maison de la Culture in Le Havre since the end of 1985, Ruiz is now responsible for one of the flagships of André Malraux's campaign to restore *la gloire* of French culture under the Gaullist Fifth Republic. Newly reconstructed after its devastation during World War Two, Le Havre was chosen for the first of Malraux's regional outposts in the early 1960s. Subsequently the Maison moved into a massive sculptural complex, the Espace Oscar Niemayer, named after its architect. Within this forbidding latter-day Norman fortress, Ruiz now oversees an impressive programme of theatre, music, dance and cinema (administered by his co-director Jean-Luc Languier) and controls an annual budget of Fr 20 million (about £2 million) for the Maison's most important task: the creation of new work.

Although a commitment to production rather than mere presentation is an integral feature of the Maison de la Culture philosophy, few actually have the resources to undertake this on any scale. But it was at one of the better-funded, in Grenoble in 1984, that Ruiz first volunteered to test whether filmmaking could be integrated with the Maison's more conventional activities. With his already legendary reputation for conjuring original films from the slender resources of French television, and fresh from the triumph of his first widely shown features *Les Trois Couronnes du matelot* (*Three Crowns*

of the Sailor, 1982) and *La Ville des pirates* (*City of Pirates*, 1983), he was perhaps an obvious candidate for the experiment. But the resulting four full-length films produced in little over six months, two of them based on local or in-house material, exceeded all expectations, including his own.

Ruiz and the team he had formed at Grenoble proposed to the Ministry of Culture a continuation of their work elsewhere. They were offered Le Havre, but ran into strong local opposition before the Ministry threatened to withdraw one-third of the Maison's funding if the new administration was not accepted. On this initially unpromising note, Languier started work in September 1985, while Ruiz continued to grapple with the appalling logistics of his long-planned *Treasure Island* for Cannon.

To understand how Ruiz conceived his plan for a combined film and performance policy in Le Havre, it's necessary to look in more detail at his work immediately before and during the Grenoble period. In 1983, he had been approached by the Avignon Festival, probably Europe's most prestigious theatre forum, with an invitation to direct a play of his choice. In fact, he had never directed for the stage, despite an early and characteristically prolific career as a playwright in Chile; so he responded by offering to make a film of a play, namely Racine's *Bérénice*. Shot in less than two weeks on a minuscule

budget (even by Ruiz's standards), with a crew drawn from his colleagues at French television's Institut National de la Communication Audiovisuelle (INA), this rarely seen work is extraordinarily effective. Its monochrome images have a burnished, hieratic quality—quite different from the suggestive mystery of *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*—which Ruiz associates with the memory of Mexican melodramas seen during his youth in Chile; while the controlled intensity of the performances (by Anne Alvaro and Jean-Bernard Guillard, henceforth regular members of the director's 'stock company'), together with the setting in a ruined mansion and vaguely 50s costumes, suggest a ghostly re-enactment of the eternal tragic conflict between passion and duty.

If *Bérénice* struck a new note of simplicity in Ruiz's work—and signalled a readiness to engage with the established classics—his other film occasioned by the 1983 Avignon Festival amply sustained a reputation for baroque complexity. *La Présence réelle* (its title a punning reference to the theological doctrine of transubstantiation) purports to be a television documentary on the various manifestations of theatre at the Festival, but framed within the science-fiction conceit of an interactive video conducted tour by an out-of-work actor. Thanks to some remarkable low-tech special effects, our guide finds himself the spectator of his own performance and eventual suicide as the piece broadens into a dizzying meditation on the frontiers of the theatrical illusion—a parallel to Ruiz's equivalent critique of the self-imposed conventions of documentary in *Great Events and Ordinary People* and a provocative prelude to the more sustained exploration of the theatrical metaphor in his recent stage and film versions of *Life Is a Dream*.

The first film produced under Grenoble auspices followed in 1984, although *L'Eveille du Pont de l'Alma* (literally 'The Wide-awake of the Alma Bridge') seems to follow directly from the perverted fairytales of *Les Trois Couronnes* and *La Ville des pirates*, with its tale of a woman raped by two philosophers on the bank of the Seine, whose son goes in search of his two insomniac fathers after his mother's death by drowning. Within this brutal fable, Ruiz stakes out the parameters of perception—sleeping and waking, blindness and recognition—in another attempt to make concrete the abstract.

However, with *Richard III*, taken

Left: Raul Ruiz at Le Havre. Photo: Ian Christie.

Below: *Bérénice*.

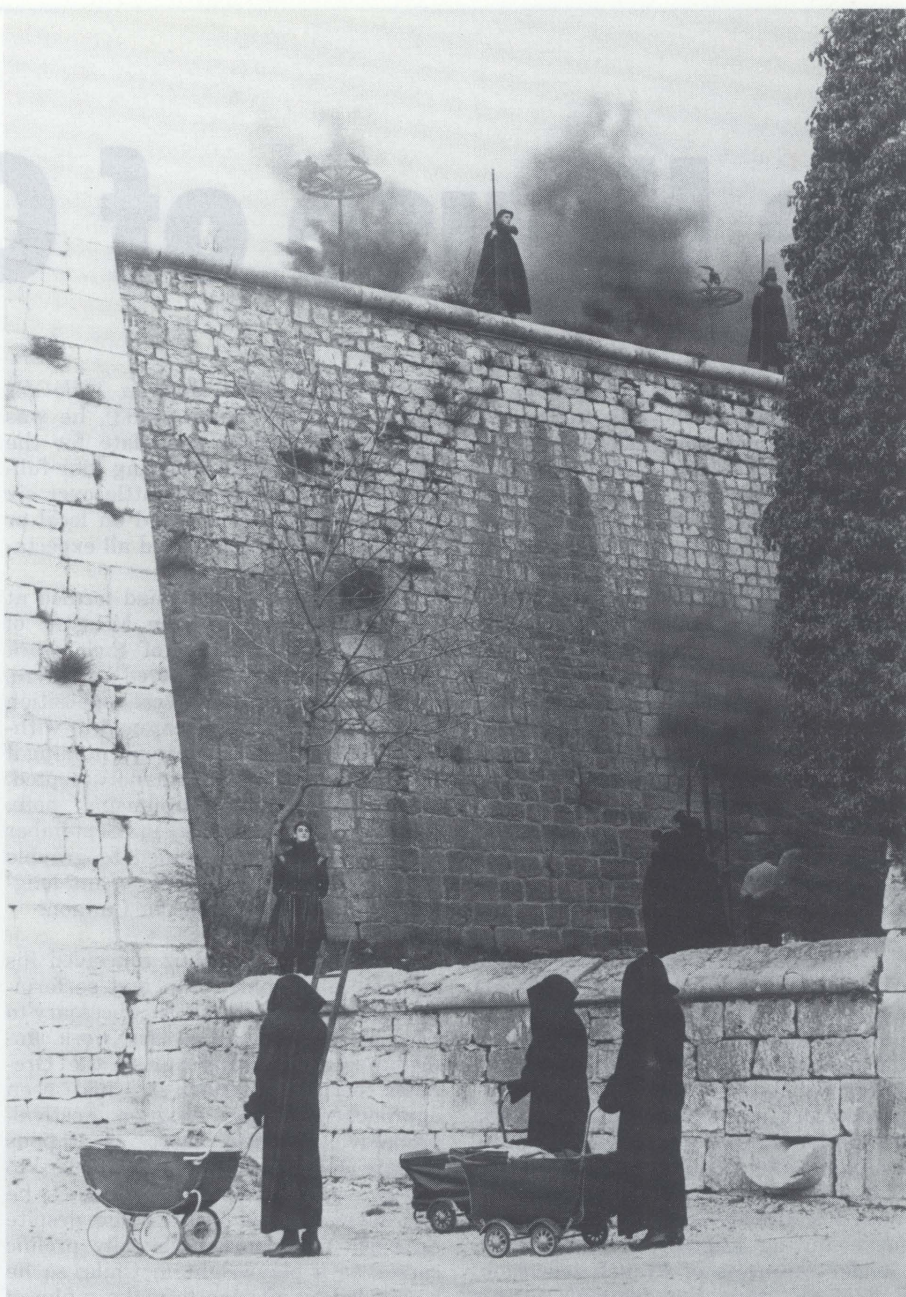


directly from a Grenoble Maison de la Culture production of Shakespeare's play by George Lavaudant, Ruiz boldly transposed a highly theatrical *mise en scène* into two contradictory spaces: natural landscape and fairytale studio artifice. His Richard is thus in turn an epicene outsider amid the political intrigues of the court and a malign Prince of Darkness; and our reading of the familiar text is troubled by an unaccustomed excess of both naturalism and expressionism. More radically, Ruiz prefaces the film with a bizarre invocation of Swift, announcing that the action takes place in Lilliput, forty years before Gulliver's arrival and despatch of Richard; and ends it with Richard's triumphant elimination of his rivals, omitting entirely the events of his reign covered in Acts IV and V. Stripped of its moral counterbalance and viewed, so to speak, through the wrong end of a telescope, this *Richard* evokes a magical anachronistic universe that has more in common with Derek Jarman's *Jubilee* or *Tempest* than with the conventions of British Shakespearean staging.

Régime sans pain (1984) added a new twist to Ruiz's established strategy of hijacking commissions: in this case an invitation from a Grenoble singing duo, Angel-Mamoiné, to direct a promotional video for them. After pointing out that, for the cost of two or three such *clips*, a feature-length film could be made, Ruiz set about devising a fable—set in the 'future' of 1982, in Grenoble—in which a scientist creates a costume that will invest its wearer with political power. Literally, the style becomes the man in this all too recognisable world dominated by success in the charts. Here, Ruiz's fascination with restoring the archetypal resonance of fairytales by means of an accumulation of stylistic shocks and excess easily adapts to the lingua franca of the rock video, even if the uneasy adaptation of the French popular song tradition to the post-punk era blunts its cutting edge.

Yet it was this production that enabled him to make a rapid preliminary sketch for what may prove to be his most ambitious project: nothing less than a 'proper' film of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. At the end of *Régime sans pain*, Ruiz 'borrowed' four days to shoot an adaptation of Louis René Des Forêts' novella *Dans un miroir*, with Anne Alvaro, Jean-Claude Wino and Melvil Poupaud. This austere, hypnotic chamber work, shot in only two sets, clearly owes much to his growing interest in the cinematic transposition of theatrical space—and also, perhaps surprisingly, to his belief that the challenge of Proust requires a Straubian approach, rather than the Resnais-like flashbacks of Pinter's published script, which he respects but considers misconceived.

His solution to the Proustian problem of the first-person narrator who is 'inside' all the characters here consists of a systematic destabilisation of the normal co-ordinates of space, time and character. As the camera performs three long, meticulously choreographed sequence-



Richard III: 'a magical anachronistic universe'.

'The style becomes the man': Ruiz at work on *Régime sans pain*.



shots that make up the film's first 'act', we have the sense that Alvaro and Wino are somewhat arbitrary fictional creations. The photographic texture meanwhile runs a full gamut from dense, claustrophobic monochrome through various filtered effects to naturalistic colour, effectively undermining our conviction of realism; and in one remarkable passage, Alvaro 'ages' before our eyes, thanks to the same filter and make-up techniques used in Mamoulian's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Obvious cuts between the long takes introduce a further level of disorientation.

The justification for this exercise in creating a 'phantasmagoric space' turns out to be an elaborate *structure en abîme*, whereby the mirror that dominates the decor of the first act underlines its theatricality and the second act reveals the first to be in fact a play, written by Alvaro's precocious young brother, which she then subjects to a literary critique before the text is—literally—thrown out of the window. Without knowing the strategy of Des Forêts' novel, it's possible to see in *Dans un miroir* a radical deconstruction of the 'innocence' of cinematic realism, which remained relatively intact in the films of Resnais and Robbe-Grillet despite their explicit self-referentiality. This is the 'realism' characterised by Stephen Heath as 'not the mirroring of some "Reality" but an attention to the forms of the intelligibility in which the real is produced, a dramatisation of possibilities of language, forms of articulation, limitations, of its own horizon.' And as Heath notes, the whole work of Proust's text can be seen in terms of 'the painful experience of the child, in the moment of awakening, of a hesitation of the conventional forms, through the habitual stability of which the subject realises his presence' (*The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing*, London 1972, pp 22-23).

Textuality, in the sense popularised by Barthes, indeed seems to be a growing preoccupation of Ruiz's public as well as his more private work. Both the two major projects he undertook 'between' Grenoble and Le Havre, *Les Destins de Manoel* (also known as *Manoel dans l'île des merveilles*, a Franco-Portuguese tv mini-series) and *Treasure Island*, hinge upon cyclic narratives of 'eternal recurrence'—sanctioned in both cases by their source in children's stories. *Manoel* opens with the statement 'the story you will hear happened in the past, but will happen again in the future'; and its young hero effectively becomes the subject of his own fairytale, as he enters a magic world through the traditional route of a secret grotto and eventually 'meets' his older self. The boy in Ruiz's paraphrase of *Treasure Island* (Jonathan, instead of Jim) is fascinated by television images of an African war, which turn out to be staged with actors who, like all the characters in the film, are engaged in a vast re-enactment of Stevenson's original tale. As in Chesterton, or Borges, the normal relationship of fiction to reality is reversed: roles and

narratives are preordained, while their temporary players come and go.

Needless to say, this metaphysical gamesmanship is scarcely calculated to extend Ruiz's popularity, despite the established pedigree of children's fantasy literature. For although we 'know' that *Alice in Wonderland* encapsulates a series of logical conundrums and primal fantasies, the weight of nineteenth century novelistic tradition still enforces a strict morality of realism as the norm of adult fiction. Transgressions of this code are punished by relegation to the margins of fantasy or whimsy, unless they can be justified in the name of 'psychological insight'. To lay bare the workings of the textual machinery is, one suspects, to violate a solemn taboo on which our whole system of representation depends. Remove the certainty of narrative closure, or question the relationship of teller to tale, and suddenly the Void threatens.

Yet it is precisely such vertigo that Ruiz constantly courts—in the enigma of a stolen painting, in the nightmare ramblings of a not-yet-ancient mariner, in children's adventure stories, in the space between two parts of a narrative, and ultimately in the juxtaposition of two shots. 'If you take two images and link them by superimposition, a simple enough device, you—the spectator—are actually in two places at once: a logical impossibility.' If the basic elements of normal film grammar provide Ruiz with a series of philosophical object lessons and the opportunity to think through classic issues in epistemology and logic 'without illustrating them or having characters speak about them,' then it becomes apparent how he can find in conventional narrative a concrete metaphor for the theological debate between freewill and determinism, or predestination.

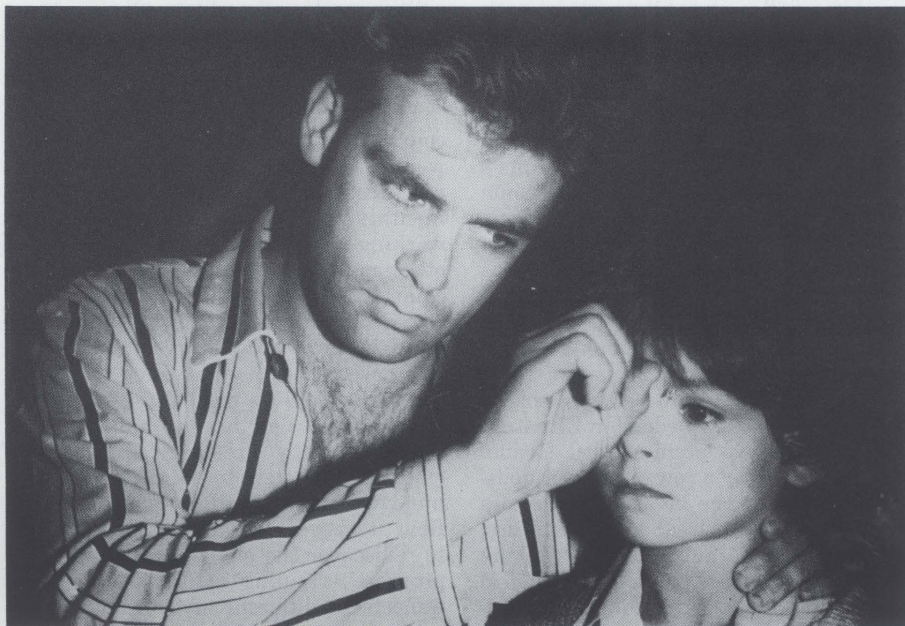
'If you accept the Thomist view, this means that there is a sort of final reckoning at the point of death, so that if you are condemned it is just, even if God knew in advance; and if the film ends

badly, it is just, even if there was no other possible ending. Whereas if you take the Molinist view [the Molinists were seventeenth century opponents of the Portuguese Thomists], at every moment in the whole of a life, or the whole of a film, there is the possibility of choice; so at every moment the film both starts and finishes, even if it has been shot in advance. This gives you two very different kinds of film which can be easily distinguished: American films which are Thomist and Marguerite Duras' films which are Molinist.' (This account of Ruiz's speculative theology is taken from his 'Conversation' with Jean-Louis Schefer, published in a special issue of *Ça cinéma*, No 20, 1980.)

Since moving to Le Havre, Ruiz has mounted an ambitious dual project which makes explicit many of the themes and issues that have underlain his work of the last decade. In response to a further Avignon Festival commission, he produced for the stage a version of *Life Is a Dream* by Spain's great seventeenth century dramatist, Calderon; and between the premiere of this production in August 1986 and its transfer to the Maison de la Culture in November, he completed a film, *Mémoire des apparences*, which uses elements of the play as a mnemonic device in a narrative about underground resistance in present-day Chile. At the time of writing, I have not seen the film, but the stage production is, inevitably, no mere costume drama. Working with his philosophical sparring-partner Schefer, Ruiz amalgamated two quite distinct versions of the same theme, separated by over forty years: Calderon's early secular drama and the religious one-act *auto sacramental* of his old age, both sharing the same title.

In the original play, the King of Poland imprisons his son Segismundo because it has been predicted that the latter will usurp his father's throne. When Segismundo is allowed to spend one day at liberty, he believes this is a

Les Destins de Manoel.





Mémoire des apparences. Photo: Brigitte Blondel.

dream, which occasions his celebrated speech:

... we are in a world so very strange
That life is but a dream; experience
Has taught me that each man who
draws a breath
Dreams what he is until he wakes in
death.
... all life, it seems
Is just a dream, and even dreams are
dreams.

Calderon's theme is the conflict between freewill and predestination, with Segismundo as the symbol of mankind held captive in the prison of spiritual darkness. He can only earn salvation and release from the chains that bind him to earthly things through faith and good works, which he does in the drama's denouement. In the *auto* this has become an allegory, peopled by such abstractions as Wisdom, Free Will, Grace and Love, all contending with the Prince of Darkness and other evil forces for the redemption of fallen Man.

Ruiz's stage production makes use of film inserts, shot in the caves of Etretat near Le Havre and shown on three back-projection screens embedded in Christian Olivarès' massive architectural facade, which is topped by a row of statue 'shells' encasing all but the heads of the actors playing the allegorical commentators. Below, Jean-Bernard Guillard (the haunted sailor from *Les Trois Couronnes*) is Segismundo, stretched out on a mas-

sive, dismembered statue representing Man. Linking the play and the film is Ruiz's interest in the ancient tradition of the Theatre of Memory and the web of theological-alchemical-mystical lore surrounding the Rosicrucian Enlightenment, as explored by the English Renaissance scholar Frances Yates. But his ultimate concern, as ever, is not the *truth* of these beliefs so much as their use to make sense of reality and what is felt to lie behind, or beyond it. Cinema, and now theatre, no less than theology, politics and nationality, are so many institutions, in Ruiz's view, for coming to terms with the strangeness of our being in the world.

The Maisons de la Culture are, of course, also an institution; and Ruiz first went to Grenoble in the hope of securing resources for a wider field of experimentation than he could command working only with INA and his friends in other marginal production contexts. He came to Le Havre with a strategy that would not only benefit himself, but also enable others to work in similar ways. Compared with the prevailing models of 'workshop' activity in Britain, his vision is ambitious. On the one hand, he believes that by creating a European cultural equivalent to the much-admired B-movie tradition of Hollywood's Poverty Row, it may be possible for film-makers to rediscover the momentum of 'work in progress', running across a variety of projects in different styles and genres.

The rationale is not strictly economic, he argues, since most European independent production is in effect subsidised; but the cross-fertilisation of ideas among a group and improvisation with 'given' resources may be ways of unblocking the widely discussed 'crisis of fiction'.

So far, two French film-makers, Laurent Perrin and Philippe Grandrieux, have agreed to embark upon the 'continuity' experiment, working with whatever materials are to hand at Le Havre. Alongside these, Ruiz has gathered an extraordinarily diverse list of directors who will make individual films at, and in co-production with, the Maison de la Culture. The first of these was the Portuguese veteran Manoel de Oliveira, whose hyperbolically theatrical *Mon Cas* (seen at Venice last year and the subject of violent disagreement) was shot on the Maison's main theatre stage in June. Theatre director André Engel has just started a film based on his Avignon production of Hofmannsthal's *Venice Preserved* which, like Ruiz's *Richard III*, will juxtapose studio sets and natural locations. Others in negotiation, with less theatrically based projects, include the Israeli Amos Gitai, with a remake of *The Golem*; former Marker associate Jean-Pierre Thorn, with the semi-fictional biography of a militant, to be shot partly on video; Moroccan-born Laurent Jaoui, with a film based on *La Comtesse de Cagliostro* by Leblanc, author of *Arsène Lupin*; Christian Zafarian, to make a four-part TV series on the archaeology of cinema; and long-time London resident Steve Dwoskin, with a free adaptation of Bataille's *Ma Mère* co-financed by Channel 4.

The other strand of work that finds a natural base at the Maison de la Culture is experimentation with new ways of recording and presenting *l'art vivant*, live performance of music, dance or theatre. Ruiz's own recent activities have already challenged the traditional French separation between theatre and cinema—he cites Sacha Guitry, the last major French exponent of both, as an influence on *Dans un miroir*—and, fresh from his first stage production, he is due to tackle opera next with a *Magic Flute*, to be conducted by Alexandre Myrat. Meanwhile, he has already collaborated with the choreographer Jean-Claude Gallotta on a dazzlingly inventive full-length dance film, *Mammame*, which makes full use of the Maison's architecture. And by the time this appears in print, he will no doubt have other projects in hand—*The Adventures of Harry Dickson*, *Histoires de Glace* and *La Chouette Aveugle*...

Truly, as Le Havre's 1986-7 programme declares, 'cinema is at the very heart of our activities.' And if Ruiz succeeds in this, his boldest gamble since the vertiginous experience of Allende's Popular Unity regime in Chile, Le Havre may yet become the unlikely seat of a new kind of New Wave: a free-masonry of film-makers in search of the alchemy that will turn television back into cinema. ■

The Heart of the Cavern

Sean French on the films of David Lynch

'To me a mystery is like a magnet. Whenever there is something that's unknown, it has a pull to it. For instance, if you were in a room and there was a doorway open and stairs going down and the light just fell away, you didn't even see the bottom, where the stairs ended; you'd be very much tempted to go down there.' That was David Lynch, on a recent visit to London, talking about his new film *Blue Velvet*. It's a conception that could be applied to all his films.

If the abiding image of a Spielberg movie is of a small group of people staring upwards—open-mouthed, reverent—at some extra-terrestrial visitation, then the equivalent in Lynch's work is of a single character staring into a sepulchral recess in search of unimaginable horrors—Henry in *Eraserhead*, peering into the recesses of the radiator or into the corner of his room where his reptilian offspring whimpers and squawks; Treves in *The Elephant Man*, led through squalid back streets for a first sight of John Merrick by the light of a flickering torch; and now, in *Blue Velvet*, Jeffrey spying through louver doors at hints of crime and perversion previously undreamt of in the wholesome small-town community of Lumberton.

Lynch's imaginative achievement deserves the compliment Denis Diderot paid to the great 18th century novelist Samuel Richardson when he hailed his genius for penetrating the civilised surface of everyday life to discover the strange, perverse passions beneath: 'He carries the torch right into the heart of the cavern; he teaches us to recognise the subtle, twisted motives which disguise themselves with motives that are more respectable. He blows away the gentle spirit who appears at the cavern entrance and reveals the dreadful monster behind.' Since making *Eraserhead*, Lynch has attempted three of the more hallowed movie genres: the historical (of the Victorian variety), science fantasy and American small town. In

each case, the force and challenge of the film has come from Lynch's ability to probe beneath the surface, to expose the dark irrational passions above which the mundane world is just a facade.

In *Eraserhead*, though, there is no facade. In his first film Lynch created a world from which everything has been stripped away except for the anxiety at its heart. Henry Spencer tramps numbly across a ruined industrial landscape. He goes for dinner with his girlfriend Mary at the house of her parents, Mr and Mrs X. They eat small chickens which move and exude a mysterious slime when cut. Henry is compelled to marry Mary because she has given birth—but so prematurely that the hospital wasn't even sure if the result was a baby.

The despair and frustration in the film's subject accords somewhat with the circumstances of its production. The entry on *Eraserhead* in the second volume of *Cult Movies* says that it took a year to film and a year to edit. This sounds daunting enough but is nevertheless an understatement. According to Lynch's own account, the film took five years to complete, from 1971 to 1976: 'We shot straight for a year and then we were down for a whole year. Then we shot and did the editing and sound piecemeal for the remainder.' The film looks as if it were set in a depressed industrial part of Detroit or Philadelphia but was in fact shot in the stables of an old mansion in Beverly Hills where Lynch was renting some rooms. During the day he delivered the *Wall Street Journal* ('I had my route down to one hour') and at night he shot *Eraserhead*.

Even ten years later, after the trauma of shooting *Dune* and in the throes of promoting a new picture, Lynch still speaks vividly of his first film-making experience: 'It was extremely frustrating to hold on to everything for so long. I couldn't do anything new because that wasn't finished, I didn't have anything to show anybody.' So I just saw the world



Blue Velvet:
Isabella Rossellini.

going by and tried to raise money and little by little I did it.'

Clearly, only a very unusual actor could have made himself available for such a period to play the leading role, but Lynch had the good fortune to find such a person in John Nance: 'Jack is a strange actor anyway. Some people are what you call highly motivated and he is the exact reverse: zero motivation. He's very content to stay at home, not even watching television, just sitting thinking in a chair, wearing his little slippers. So he was pretty happy. He just had to keep his hair cut, he wore a little hat. But he did fine for the five years.'

If nothing else, however, the extreme length of shooting allowed Lynch to make sure everything in the film was right. There is a whole range of flaws that are traditionally associated with and excused in student or 'underground' films: poor lighting, echoing sound, clumsy acting, rickety sets, shaky camerawork. *Eraserhead* is not just without these faults; it is one of the major technical achievements of its decade. One is tempted to hail the film as a one-man, shoestring, nightmare version of *Citizen Kane* because of the vitality with which it uses every element available. For example, the careful use of sound, in particular the sound of some mysterious industrial process, is an integral part of the film. (Alan Splet, who collaborated with Lynch on sound for *Eraserhead*, has remained with him for all his subsequent films.)

Making *Eraserhead*, David Lynch had a level of control over every aspect of the film-making process that most directors, however successful, will never achieve. This is of far more than anecdotal interest in a consideration of Lynch's career. The script is only one part of the finished movie—22 pages for an 89-minute film (scripts usually work out at about a page per minute). Lynch speaks of the exhilaration he felt standing in the set of Mr and Mrs X's apartment and realising that what he had

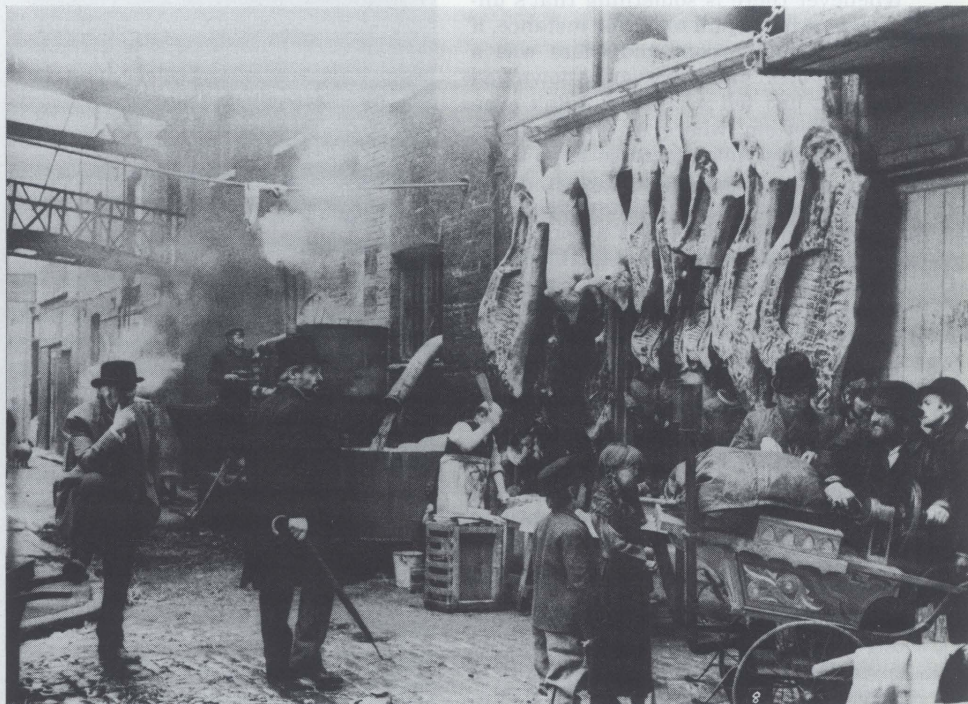
pictured in his mind had been exactly recreated. And this control had immense implications for the film itself. The narrative is as much concerned with the industrial hum of the soundtrack, the metamorphic worms, the terrifying machines, as it is with what is said. This move beyond the mere words and plot forms a fruitful and fascinating struggle right through Lynch's work.

Such an approach can prove difficult for critics, and when *Eraserhead* appeared in Britain in 1979 there was a general unwillingness to provide exegesis. As Paul Taylor prudently concluded in his review in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, it was 'a movie to be experienced rather than explained'. However what is needed for *Eraserhead* is not a glossary of symbols but a clear account of its imaginative power. The two sources of horror in the film are the diseased organic world of the body itself and the cruel machines (and indeed the ruined industrial setting) that surround it. With a cold, clear eye, David Lynch shows us both kinds of disgust—the slimy, unguent products of the human

body and its activities and then the vividly imagined device into which Henry's head is inserted to be processed into erasers for pencils.

What is remarkable with Lynch's subsequent film, *The Elephant Man*, is the degree to which he was able to assimilate these concerns into a vividly conceived historical setting. Almost the first words that we hear spoken by Frederick Treves, the rescuer of the elephant man, are when he is operating on a man who has been fearfully injured in an industrial accident: 'Abominable things these machines—you can't reason with them.' From the start, John Merrick, trapped in his grotesque and unwieldy body, was an apt Lynch hero. But to the physical afflictions, Lynch has added those of the machine.

What strikes one, seeing *The Elephant Man* after *Eraserhead*, is not just the consistency of Lynch's vision, but its authenticity. Lynch almost makes the film's subject the noise and activity of Victorian London, a place invaded by machines and hordes of people. Treves wanders through a city which is plausibly



Right: Victorian London in *The Elephant Man*.

Far right: David Lynch.

Below, left to right: *Dune*, *Eraserhead*, Kyle MacLachlan in *Blue Velvet*.



presented as the industrial hub of the world—labouring gangs toil on the street, machines pound with Alan Splet's familiar sound effects. It is also, most intelligently, a city in which the industrial revolution has been going on for a long time. Factories and buildings are already crumbling, as are the mechanical devices in the fair where Merrick is displayed.

It's a film of beautifully judged contrasts—the exploitation of Merrick by the vicious Bytes and the more benign exploitation by Treves, scenes of sentiment and scenes of brutal violence, the attic room where Merrick finds refuge and the basement of the hospital where Michael Elphick primes the boiler and devises schemes to exploit the elephant man. To say that David Lynch has made this material his own by imposing his preconceived ideas would be unjust. (And untrue: the original script, partially rewritten by Lynch, was by Christopher de Vore and Eric Bergren.) The sense of the teeming city life, for example, gives the film most appropriately the range of a Victorian novel. Michael Elphick is a

marvellously Dickensian villain, almost igniting with the sulphurous energy of his wickedness.

The Elephant Man would probably have been a workmanlike film in the hands of an average director. Lynch's achievement is to show us the world through the eyes of Merrick, rather than Merrick through the eyes of the world. This is managed not just through the satanic presentation of London and of the torments of the circus, but also through Merrick's own fantasy life. One of Lynch's principal contributions to the script was the introduction of the elephant man's dreams, the visions of the elephants that had frightened his mother during her pregnancy and thus, he thought, caused his deformity. Merrick is portrayed in the film with tenderness and delicacy, but his existence in his little attic room is a pathetic mimicry of what he believes normal life to be. It is fantasies that truly liberate him. Perhaps the most brilliant and audacious sequence in the film is that where Merrick is taken to visit the theatre. A tawdry play is transformed through his innocent eyes into something magical and fantastic.

For his third film, David Lynch ran into a creative problem that proved fundamentally more intractable than that of *Eraserhead*. Instead of a small film on a shoestring he was faced with a huge film, *Dune*, with one of the largest budgets in cinema history. It took three and a half years (of seven days a week) to make, a year of which was actually spent shooting—six months principal photography and six months miniatures and special effects. The result, as Lynch admits, was successful neither artistically nor commercially.

There are strange and wonderful things in *Dune*. At its best, it's like a baroque parody of the epic, as if *El Cid* were to be remade by Leni Riefenstahl after having seen *Eraserhead* under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs. The film is crammed with bizarre detail:

costumes that look as though they were left over from a particularly decayed and decadent corner of the Austro-Hungarian empire; fetishistic instruments of torment, including, in the court of the Baron Harkonnen, what looks like a nutcracker with a mouse inside it—when the nutcracker is squeezed, there is a last squeak and the defunct rodent exudes juice which is then drunk (an all too typical Lynch touch this); architecture that seems to consist largely of slimy membranes. Lynch's visions of cruelty were relatively limited in his first two films, but in *Dune* they are given full rein. The villains, especially Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, are so depraved that when they cannot find victims to torture, they torture each other, or even themselves. Harkonnen employs an attendant whose sole duty seems to be to pierce the boils that cover his master's face.

In fact, Kenneth McMillan's Harkonnen is the best thing in the film, an antic sadist who perpetually hovers about his court like a gross, malevolent Peter Pan gleefully inventing perversions to inflict on his victims. The good side, the opponents of the wicked jesters, are the blue-eyed Fremmen, who conserve and guard the water on the dry planet of *Dune*, and one of the film's more telling moments is when Lynch shows us a vast tank of water, as valuable and beautiful as liquid gold.

But in the end *Dune* is inescapably bad and boring. According to Lynch, the problem was that they had to compress the film too much to edit it into two hours. And during shooting there had already been a general loss of nerve, as a result of which Lynch (with others) tried to insert reams of dialogue to explain the byzantine complications of Frank Herbert's original novel. As Lynch sees it, the book itself didn't really fit together: 'It was really too late to plug up the holes—the water just kept coming out and it was really frightening.' The result, for much of the film, is both unintelligible and curiously uninteresting, as if Lynch himself had lost the thread of the enterprise. However, he still nurtures plans to re-edit the film, removing much of the dialogue and changing it to what he feels is its right length: 'I would like to make it more like a long poem. Just let it be abstract in some places, with no dialogue, and let it be more of a mood.'

The failure of *Dune* for a time severed Lynch's relationship with the producer Dino De Laurentiis, and caused another hiatus in his own career. But then for *Blue Velvet*, a film Lynch desperately wanted to make, Laurentiis offered a special deal: a reduced fee and a reduced budget, but total artistic control. The result for Lynch, after the agony of *Dune*, was 'like being taken to heaven'.

In subject matter *Blue Velvet* is conventionally American. Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan, who also played the hero in *Dune*) returns from college to the small town of Lumberton when his father is taken to hospital. Returning from hospital one day, he discovers a severed human ear lying in a field. He



delivers it to the police, but takes up the investigation himself when he is told by a local detective's daughter, Sandy (Laura Dern), that a mysterious woman called Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini), a local nightclub singer, is somehow caught up in the case. Jeffrey's inquiries uncover a criminal conspiracy involving the psychopath Frank (Dennis Hopper). But he also becomes involved both with Dorothy and, on a much more innocent level, with Sandy.

As in many thrillers, Jeffrey's motives become confused: 'I don't know whether you're a detective or a pervert,' Sandy says to him. Jeffrey uncovers a violent, seamy side of his wholesome home town but he also makes uncomfortable discoveries about himself. As Lynch himself puts it: 'It's like in my life. Say at a party, I can't imagine certain people in the same room with other people and yet I know them both. And that's the way Jeffrey is. He can connect different worlds. He can look into Sandy's world, he can look into Dorothy's world, he can go into Frank's world.'

Blue Velvet is Lynch's first film set either in the present day or in a recognisable version of America. The setting, Lumberton, is a familiar kind of town, familiar from Capra and Sturges, with high-school parties and friendly local stores. It's also oddly appropriate for Lynch himself, who, quite contrary to the impression left by his films, is like an amiable character that has wandered out of an Andy Hardy movie. Yet, paradoxically, the film's familiarity and intimacy serve to show just how strange his version of reality is. Normal life proceeds along a thin thread while all around is darkness and violence. In the first scene of the film, Jeffrey's father keels over while watering his front lawn, and as he lies comatose, hose in hand, Lynch's camera moves down beneath the top of the grass. In one camera movement, a scene from Norman Rockwell becomes a jungle out of Douanier Rousseau.

Interestingly, this subversion of the complacency of small-town life has been the central theme of a recent cinematic

genre, the meretricious teenage slasher cycle of movies that was begun by John Carpenter's *Halloween*. But Lynch's version is far richer and wittier. Sandy pulls up in front of the local church and while the soundtrack swells with religious music, she tells Jeffrey a sugary parable about robins arriving on Earth to bring perfect happiness. And, sure enough, when the equivocal happy ending arrives and Jeffrey is reunited with her in the family dwelling, a robin flutters down and perches on the kitchen windowsill and Sandy cries tears of joy. But the robin is pulling at a beetle that is wriggling in its beak.

It's a grim twist to the tale of another feathered emblem, the bluebird of happiness, that another Dorothy returned to find in her own backyard. The point seems to be that you don't need to catch a murderer to uncover violence and perversion. Just look around you. *Blue Velvet* is the film that David Lynch's career so far had been preparing him to make. His previous work had shown cruelty and perversion in the safely surreal confines of a man's mind, in a society from the last century and in an imaginary universe. But when Jeffrey responds to Dorothy's masochistic invitation and beats her and is then beaten up in turn as a form of poetic justice, the observation is too close to provide any comfort to its civilised audience.

The final brilliant twist of this extraordinary film is to show us, not just the strangeness of what surrounds normal life, but the strangeness of normal life itself. David Lynch has adapted Shelley's injunction to make the familiar unfamiliar into a vision that makes the familiar weird. The cameraman, Frederick Elmes (who also photographed *Eraserhead*), shoots these respectable small-town citizens with a wicked slant. Lynch has wittily heeded the advice of his sternest critics, to deal with 'real life', and shown that it is as surreal as the menage of Mr and Mrs X in *Eraserhead*. You don't have to go down the stairs into the dark in search of horror when there is plenty up here in the light. ■

Blue Velvet: Dennis Hopper and Dean Stockwell.



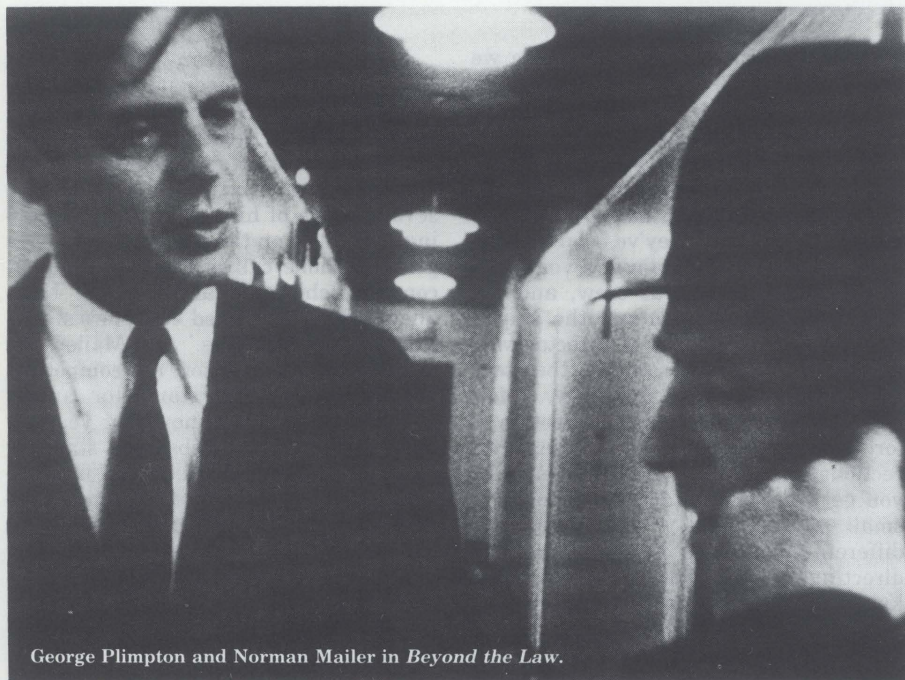
In the late 1960s, between winning 'New Journalism' works such as *Armies of the Night* and a losing race for Mayor of New York City, Norman Mailer wrote, cast, financed, directed and starred in three full-length, low-budget movies, *Wild 90*, *Beyond the Law* and *Maidstone*. These pictures weren't exactly *The Naked and the Dead*, nor were they intended to be. They were made in fun, in the spirit in which Mailer challenged Gore Vidal to a boxing match or debated with Germaine Greer at New York's Town Hall on the liberation of women. And mainly untried actors, extremely sketchy scripts and bouncy, improvised *cinéma-vérité* style shooting seemed fine for Mailer's purposes.

When Mailer made his 60s trilogy, all released in 1968, he claimed that his inexperience and amateurishness were actually virtues against the fossilised mainstream cinema. (Rare films he did admire: *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, *On the Waterfront*, *Midnight Cowboy*.) He boasted that his primitivist approach could 'give a sense of the bewildering surface of cinematic reality which was finer by far than the work of all but the very best film artists.'

In November 1983, Mailer was invited to Brookline, Massachusetts, for a special tribute by Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art. For this first-time retrospective of films he hadn't seen in years, he helped to dig out the old prints and agreed to speak at a screening of *Maidstone*. The film was an experiment, he said, and he hoped people would watch it charitably. 'I'm curious to find out whether it's ten years ahead of its time or twenty years behind it, or whether it went clear off into a time that never existed.' With that, Mailer marched off the stage of Brookline's Coolidge Corner Moviehouse and *Maidstone* was shown: his self-starring, self-promoting, admittedly self-indulgent saga about a pornographic film-maker who runs for President. When he

Medium-Boiled Mailer

GERALD PEARY



George Plimpton and Norman Mailer in *Beyond the Law*.

returned to talk afterwards, Mailer was smiling. He had found it a pleasant surprise. 'It's better the fourth or fifth time,' he assured a sceptical crowd, 'especially if treated as a family movie.'

He admitted that his film became increasingly chaotic and incoherent. 'The actors were fresher at the beginning,' he said. 'But I made the whole film on three hours sleep a night. By the last days, I was a general suffering from combat fatigue.' He was sorry that the audience didn't get the chance to see the original three-hour version, which was never released. 'It was kind of good. Also easier to follow. Also, very boring.'

Maidstone at any length is *Citizen Kane* next to Mailer's first film, *Wild 90*, the embarrassment of the Boston tribute. *Wild 90* is a one-set, stagnant *No Exit* in Brooklyn, with three Mafia thugs lying low in a warehouse. Two of them talk pidgin Peter Falk; the third, the Prince

(Mailer), sounds like some strange mixture of Rod Steiger and Aldo Ray. Mailer's Prince has bleary, punchy eyes and thick boxer's hands. He snarls a lot; he gets smart with the cops; he talks tedious nonsense that only an Andy Warhol could have loved; he engages in a sustained barking contest with a German shepherd. Finally, the Prince looks straight into the camera and addresses whatever audience may still be out there: 'You've been watching all this courtesy of the CIA.' The Prince ends the movie by reading a poem credited to Norman Mailer.

In 1983, Mailer admitted to discomfort about anyone forced to watch *Wild 90*. But he remained proud of his next picture, *Beyond the Law*, the only one of his films to attract any good reviews when it was released. He also liked his acting turn in the film.

Dressed as a plainclothes policeman,

with a hat squashed down on his head, Mailer is surprisingly effective as a hardnosed Irish lieutenant who conducts police interrogations in the old-fashioned way of tough dicks since the Inquisition. Before the liberals started interfering. Other cops and crooks, including Jack Richardson (*The Connection*) and Michael McClure (*The Beard*), are also fine. In fact, there are flashes of genuine brilliance in *Beyond the Law*: the brutal interrogations become so lifelike that you want to beg a dime to call a lawyer. Unfortunately, the film drags badly in the second half, when Mailer starts chasing dames. Rip Torn is too hammy as a macho biker, *Paris Review* editor George Plimpton fumbles as a wimpish liberal Mayor, a part modelled after John Lindsay, former Mayor of New York City, whom Mailer did not love.

As Mailer explained in Boston, it was the semi-success of *Beyond the Law* which led him to believe he could shoot *Maidstone* in five days. Not since *Gatsby* arrived in East Egg had the stolid, respectable part of Long Island been subjected to such an invasion of parvenus and pranksters as Mailer's *Maidstone* company. Everybody who mattered in his life flocked there to be in the film: boxing pals; fair weather friends from Provincetown, Massachusetts; two ex-wives; his current (now also ex-) wife Beverly Bentley; and a crowd of Mailer children.

With *Maidstone*, Mailer jumped impetuously ahead to make an 8½ with only his third movie. The slim plot: secret police surrounding Norman T. Kingsley (Mailer), film-maker and presidential candidate, are hoping to assassinate him before he beats out Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 election. But the film is mainly remembered for its coda, a legendary moment of painful reality intruding on fiction. Rip Torn, who played Kingsley's brother, suddenly went for Mailer's head with a toy hammer, and perpetrated this act of violence before a running camera.

Surprised and bleeding, Mailer retaliated by sinking his teeth in Rip Torn's unguarded ear. There is a forgotten wild card in the lore surrounding the most dubious battle since Mohammed Ali-Sonny Liston. As we see clearly in the film, Mailer's wife, Beverly Bentley, joined in the squabble too, clobbering Torn. Two against one; and so much for anyone's image of a macho Mailer.

Why the attack? Rip Torn claimed that he was simply acting in character, trying to wound Norman T. Kingsley, presidential candidate, and that somehow real-life Mailer's head got in the way. 'I think Rip was right,' Mailer said fifteen years later in Boston. 'We made it up long ago. But my eldest daughter, who witnessed the fight as a child, wouldn't talk to him at parties for years.'

In fall 1986, Mailer, now 63 years old and serious, tries movies again. For the first time in his life, he is directing a scripted film, with a professional cast and crew and with significant money behind it. Cannon Films has provided a \$6 million budget for Mailer to write and direct a 35mm film of his 1984 novel, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*.

The book was written, and also set, in Mailer's summer home of Provincetown, at the end of Cape Cod. Here, Eugene O'Neill wrote his plays, and the Pilgrims first landed. 'I love Provincetown and I thought it would be a wonderful place to make a film,' Mailer says. So instead of returning in the autumn to his Brooklyn home, he stayed on to shoot *Tough Guys*. The film stars Ryan O'Neal as Tim Madden, the anxiety-ridden protagonist in search of a missing, perhaps murdered wife. Isabella Rossellini plays Madeleine, Madden's ex-wife, a world-weary Italian.

'In the earlier movies, I wouldn't really call myself a director,' says Mailer. He is between camera set-ups in the attic office of his home, and *Tough Guys* interiors are being shot downstairs. 'I didn't spend any time with the cameramen; I'd leave it up to them what to film. There were no scripts, and I worked as an actor. I wanted to, so that I could push the stories one way or another from the centre of the action. Afterwards, I took forever editing them. *Maidstone* had 45 hours of sound and film, and it took me three years to get it down to ninety minutes.'

Was it worth the trouble? Mailer acknowledges the criticism of his 1968 trilogy, but he also feels an affection for the films. 'They had great stuff but they also had great flaws. The sound was substandard. That's what sank them finally. You could hardly hear them. Those movies were done mostly without professional actors, because I didn't have scripts. But my conclusion is that you can't do a scripted movie without professionals, unless you have an unlimited budget. If you're working on a tight budget, as with *Tough Guys*, you had better have real pros because the irony is that, once the production begins, you have no time to spend with the actors. The lighting takes so long, the sound has to work, and so on. We were lucky to



Norman Mailer, Lawrence Tierney.

have two weeks of rehearsal before we began.'

How did Mailer's veteran technicians react to being ordered about by a novelist turned film-maker? 'It was no secret to the crew that this was my first film by their measure, but I haven't felt any tension about that. They've been wonderful. I feel like the captain of a very good ship with a marvellous crew, and I'm trying to learn how to run the ship. I haven't been the kind of director who says, "Get that person off the set," because I don't feel that way. I feel relatively relaxed. Most of direction is foreseeing problems and making corrections when there are problems. As you get older, you tend to have a lot of small wisdom tucked in about forty different nooks and crannies, and film directing brings this out. You must know about carpentry, book-keeping, the whims of actors—your mind goes to a different place every thirty minutes. I like that.'

Downstairs, Mailer's elegant two-storey brick house on the bay side of the Atlantic has been made over, the interior redone to match the gaudy personality of Madden's wife, Patty Lareine. Lareine is a determined dyed-blond, and so Mailer's home is now painted yellow; and lemon-coloured paintings, badly imitating Matisse, clog the walls.

On this day, deep in the sixth week of a seven-week schedule, Mailer spends sixteen hours sequestered in a corner bedroom supervising the filming, and refilming, of Ryan O'Neal. For the camera, O'Neal (Madden) climbs out of bed looking suicidal. He goes into the bathroom and writes on the mirror in shaving cream the number of days since his wife's disappearance. The shaving cream scenes are shot many ways and with various numbers: 21, 24, 27. That is because Madden repeats this 'ritual' several times in *Tough Guys*, on several unhappy mornings.

Joking keeps Ryan O'Neal alert through so many tedious takes. Once he collapses on his back on the floor, saying 'Ryan is tired!' in a Jerry Lewis voice, in a mock attempt to get Mailer to stop shooting. And after perhaps the seventh take of himself placing a shaving cream '24' on the mirror, he makes a pretend phone call to Cannon's budget-conscious chief, Menahem Golan. 'Menahem? Hello! We need two more weeks shooting the numbers.' And Mailer? He acts like a true director, not competing, wit for wit, with his star actor, an old friend whom he has known for years in New York. Mostly he observes, standing quietly by, hands shoved deep into the front pockets of his pants, swaying on his heels. Just as he said, Mailer spends his time with the technicians, discussing lighting and camera set-ups; and at least once during the afternoon he peers into the camera to see what O'Neal is doing at the bathroom mirror.

Isabella Rossellini is away in New York for the weekend, but several of the *Tough Guys* principals have stuck it out in Provincetown. One is Lawrence Tierney, who starred in such cult classics of 1940s B picture-making as *Dillinger* (1945) and *Born to Kill* (1947) and who is coming back to major roles as Dougy, Tim Madden's longshoreman father. Another is the 'discovery' of the Mailer film, Debra Sandlund, who plays Patty Lareine.

Tierney, who is off for the day, is holed up watching Boris Becker win a tennis match on his motel television set. A grim, uncommunicative man, the 66-year-old actor has little good to say about his career, past or present. 'In the old days, I drank too much and got into trouble,' he says, a reference to his long ago history as a brawler. And today? 'I don't drink alcohol,' he declares, and proves it by knocking back glasses of milk throughout the interview. He's a kind man, too, in his own way, and



Ryan O'Neal, Norman Mailer. Photos: Adam Bartos.

shows that by offering milk and cookies to his motel guests. 'Do you want a cookie?' he keeps asking, just like the Mafia don in *Prizzi's Honor*. Tierney played a police captain in *Prizzi's Honor*, a rare turn on the right side of the law. Usually, he has been typed as a tough guy, beginning with his John Dillinger. He played Jesse James twice, in *Badman's Territory* (1946) and *Best of the Badmen* (1951), and he was the black-guard who derailed the circus train in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952).

Tierney enjoyed acting for DeMille ('He was a nice guy. Most people thought he was a tyrant') and also for John Huston in *Prizzi's Honor*. He has even developed some feeling for Dillinger in the years since playing the role and since discovering that at the age of twenty Dillinger was railroaded into a ten-year prison sentence. 'That made him bitter,' Tierney said. Tierney is bitter too, with reason. His always precarious Hollywood career was sabotaged by Hedda Hopper, the gossip columnist. 'She would print terrible lies, completely manufactured. She was a twisted tyrant. I should have sued Hedda, but I didn't know enough to do it.' Things are better with *Tough Guys*. 'They had me read for the role, and Norman is pretty happy with it. Norman knows what he wants, and we get along. And *Tough Guys* is an interesting, high-grade mystery.'

In some ways, Dougy Madden is the moral centre of Mailer's askew story, coming over as the most normal character. No matter that he helps his messed-up son escape a trumped-up murder charge by dumping several decapitated female heads into the Atlantic. Quite understandably, Tierney disagrees with this analysis. 'I don't know that it's normal to throw women's heads into the ocean. If that's normal, we're all in deep trouble.'

Patty Lareine is certainly among the

abnormal crew. 'I think you can look at her exterior and decide she's a bitch,' says Debra Sandlund, who also has a decapitated head to deal with. Helping to bury it in the woods was the most difficult scene she had to act in the movie. 'I'm off in the woods in my own world, feeling the effects of my life in Provincetown, and the effects of having shot and killed someone. Norman wrote me a little monologue, a little aria of disconnected thoughts, something very literary. My problem was to try to connect those disconnected thoughts. Unlike Patty, I've never shot anyone.'

The 'aria' part was easy. Debra Sandlund holds a master's degree in music from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, where she studied theatre and opera. She was flown out to Hollywood to appear on several television beauty pageants, where her talent was performing an aria from Rossini's *La Cenerentola*. She won a trip to Fiji on *Dream Girl USA*, admittedly compressing the six-minute aria into a compact ninety seconds.

In August, she moved to Los Angeles, got an agent, appeared in one episode of *The A-Team*, and then, out of nowhere, survived through four auditions for *Tough Guys* to land the precious part as Ryan O'Neal's missing and murderous wife. 'The night before callback, I went to a bookstore in Westwood, got *Tough Guys*, and stood there and skimmed a Mailer biography. I knew little about him. Maybe ignorance makes one less intimidated...'

Back in his attic office, Mailer talks about his cast. 'When we auditioned Debra Sandlund, everyone agreed she should have the role; and I must say I've never regretted it since. And people who think they know Ryan O'Neal as an actor are going to be surprised. He's a witty actor. He gives odd turns to a scene. He can work with a wonderful economy. He's just very good. And work-

ing with Kubrick on *Barry Lyndon* didn't do him any harm.' Mailer had never seen Isabella Rossellini on screen until he arranged an advance screening of *Blue Velvet* and liked both the actress and the film. 'I thought it was the first film I had seen in years that dared to put evil on the screen and, in large measure, it succeeded. There is something satanic about moments in the film, a sense of how bad it is out there.'

'Next to the really hard-boiled school,' he says about *Tough Guys*, 'it's more medium-boiled. Of the genre I'm invading, the film I most respect is *Chinatown*, a wonderful picture with a wonderful script.' He sees *Tough Guys* as, 'A commercial film which with luck will find a reasonably large audience. You want it to be seen as an art film twenty years after it was made, not two weeks after it comes out.'

Had Raoul Walsh's version of *The Naked and the Dead*, released in 1958, turned into such an art classic over the years? Not for Mailer. In 1966 he called it 'one of the worst movies ever made'; and he still hates it. 'Charles Laughton was to do it, and we spent a week together in New York at Laughton's St Moritz Hotel penthouse. He had a great dedication to the novel, and he was coming off directing *The Night of the Hunter*, which he thought would do extraordinarily. It didn't. Laughton was not a young man, and it took everything out of him. He never directed again. *The Naked and the Dead* went to Paul Gregory, the producer and Laughton's friend, and then it went on from there in the usual history of something not really wanted. Finally, Walsh made it for Warners and it was dreadful.'

The Naked and the Dead could still, Mailer thinks, make a good movie. Perhaps directed by himself? He wants to direct more 'conventional' narrative films. 'If the next picture had a bigger budget, I'd like to do a scene with a couple of hundred extras, and say to the AD with his bullhorn: "Tell them to hurry up!"... To begin directing at my age, it's vainglorious to have any suspicion that you'll end up as a great director. Kurosawa wasn't made in a day, nor Bergman, nor Fellini. Coppola spends his life breathing films. But I think I can be a good director. I have a literary sense that I can apply to film. Because of my writing background, I have a sense of character that is probably deeper than with a lot of directors, and actors love it if you can tell them about what they are playing. Otherwise, they have a terrible problem creating the characters themselves, and often these don't fit the plot.'

After five weeks of non-stop shooting, Mailer seems to be confident, amiable and having quite a good time. Could it be that film directing is... easy? 'Easier than writing novels, anyway. Writing is so lonely, and it demands everything in you. You never quit the work. As a novelist, I dream about the book and just worry all the time. It's like being in debt and trying to keep up payments. It's like being in prison. I sleep better as a filmmaker than I ever did as novelist.' ■

ANDREI · TARKO

With the shadow of his own fatal illness upon him, Tarkovsky, in his final film *The Sacrifice* (1986), has Alexander speak the words: 'There is no death, only the fear of death.' In the work he has left us Tarkovsky will live on; of that there can be no doubt. But with his going an epoch that began in 1962 with the showing of *Ivan's Childhood* in Venice has come to an end.

Andrei Tarkovsky was born on 4 April 1932 in Savrashye on the Volga, the son of Arseniy Tarkovsky, a poet whose works met with considerable acclaim in later years, and Maya Ivanovna Vishnyakova. Both parents had studied at the Literary Institute in Moscow. The village where their son was born no longer exists. It now lies beneath the waters of a lake created when a dam was built in that area. But the places and images of Tarkovsky's early years left an indelible impression upon him and were to have a profound influence on his work.

By 1935, when the family moved to a place outside Moscow, strains were beginning to show in the relationship between mother and father, leading to their divorce and the ultimate departure of the father. Andrei grew up in the company of his mother, grandmother and sister, without a man in the house. In 1939 he attended a school in Moscow, but was later evacuated to relatives on the Volga during the war. With the outbreak of war his father volunteered for military service, in the course of which he lost a leg. The family returned to Moscow in 1943, where Tarkovsky's mother worked in a printing firm as a reader and corrector. For the boy the war years were filled with two main preoccupations: the question of survival and the return of his father from the front. When Arseniy Tarkovsky did finally come back, however, highly decorated with the Order of the Red Star, he did not rejoin the family.

It was the firm wish of Tarkovsky's mother that her son should work in the field of art. Her own belief in the importance of art was reflected in his formal education. Having attended a school of music and later an art school, Tarkovsky subsequently remarked that his work as a director would have been inconceivable without this training. From 1951 he studied at the Institute for Oriental Languages. These studies were, however, broken off on account of a sport injury, and Tarkovsky joined a geological research group on an expedition to Siberia,

where he remained for nearly a year and produced a whole series of drawings and sketches. In 1954, on his return from this journey, he successfully applied for a place at the Moscow Film School (WGK), where he was to study under Mikhail Romm.

Tarkovsky's first feature film, and at the same time his diploma submission at the school, was *The Steamroller and the Violin* (1960-61). The screenplay for this 46-minute film was the product of a fruitful collaboration with Andrei Michalkov-Konchalovsky, with whom Tarkovsky also worked on *Andrei Roublev* and Michalkov-Konchalovsky's own film *The First Teacher*.

Tarkovsky's first 'full-length' film, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), was, in contrast, the outcome of an extremely unpromising situation. The project had started under the direction of E. Abalov, but had been abandoned because of the unsatisfactory quality of the sequences filmed. Later the decision was made to salvage the film after all, and Tarkovsky was placed in charge of its completion. The fact that he was able to create a work of such emotional impact in these circumstances is testimony to his powers as a film-maker and to his strength of vision. Despite its mixed parentage, the film is very much his child and bears the unmistakable fingerprints of his style. It describes the fate of a young boy prematurely aged and ultimately destroyed by the war. Tarkovsky denied the apparent parallels between his own youth and that of Ivan, remarking that the only things they had in common were their age and the circumstances of war. The film won the Golden Lion at Venice and established Tarkovsky's international reputation at a single stroke.

This was reinforced seven years later, when *Andrei Roublev*, completed in 1966, was finally given its first showing in the west at Cannes in 1969. Apart from the closing passages, the work was filmed in black and white at Tarkovsky's insistence and depicts a vast panorama of Russian medieval life and the experiences of the monk and icon painter Roublev. The outward events, however, provide a canvas for an apocalyptic view of the world that anticipates many themes in Tarkovsky's final film.

Solaris (1972) was based on the novel of the same name by Stanislaw Lem. It is perhaps the least convincing of Tarkovsky's films and indeed the one he himself found least satisfactory. Like

many of his works, it describes a journey (in this case a voyage to the planet Solaris) that at the same time can be regarded as an inward, spiritual journey. Although the metaphysical dimension of the story and the phenomena it describes (the materialisation of visions and memories) were themes that were evidently of great interest to Tarkovsky, he was unable to escape entirely from the trappings of the science fiction genre and penetrate to the human, psychological problems that were closest to his heart. The film is nevertheless far removed in this respect from Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey* (1968), to which *Solaris* came to represent a kind of Russian counterpart.

The Mirror (1974-75) was a film of quite a different quality, with strongly autobiographical elements and of an intimate visionary intensity. Allegedly, there is not a single invented episode in the film. It is Tarkovsky's most personal work and was much criticised, particularly in Russia, for its subjectivism; but its remarkable portrayal of childhood, its magical, child's view of the world provides us with a key to an understanding of the allusive technique of Tarkovsky's entire oeuvre.

With *Stalker* (1979) he returned, outwardly at least, to the world of science fiction. The film is based on the novel *Roadside Picnic* by the brothers Arkadi and Boris Strugatski and again takes the form of a journey, this time into a forbidden 'Zone'. Here, however, Tarkovsky makes the material completely his own, describing a quest for belief through a landscape of industrial and spiritual ruin. Here too he develops the techniques articulated in earlier films and summarised in *The Mirror*, employing a wealth of iconographic images and a colour code to distinguish between different realms and states of consciousness.

His difficulties with the Soviet authorities led Tarkovsky to apply to make his next film, *Nostalghia* (1983), in Italy. Ironically, it describes the homesickness for Russia of a scientist who has come to research in Italy and who ultimately dies before he can return. It continues Tarkovsky's search for the roots of life and belief in modern society and is filled with those allegories and visual icons, shifts of time, person and place that one increasingly came to associate with this director. The self-sacrifice that Domenico makes in *Nostalghia*, in an attempt to

TARKOVSKY (1932-1986)



find that point in our history where we had taken the wrong turning, is taken up again in Tarkovsky's last film.

Nostalgia was dedicated to his mother; *The Sacrifice* (1986), shot when he was marked by illness, is dedicated to Tarkovsky's son, and is a protestation of faith and hope for the future. The film, generally regarded as the outstanding work at Cannes in 1986 and expected to win the Golden Palm, was finally awarded the Special Prize of the Jury, which because of his illness, was collected on his behalf by his son.

Tarkovsky's reputation rests on a slender oeuvre of eight films made over a period of little more than 25 years. His final project, *Hoffmaniana*, based on a screenplay he first published in 1976, and dealing with the life and work of the German Romantic poet E.T.A.

Hoffmann, remained unfinished. But this handful of completed works is individually of such weight and vision that each one of them alone might have secured him a place in film history. It was his ambition to raise the art of cinema to a level achieved in the other arts; in literature, for example, by poets such as Dostoevsky or Tolstoy.

Childhood and war, the quest for belief, nostalgia as a yearning for home, as a sickness unto death, sacrifice and hope are not merely the epic and universal themes of his films; they are at the same time stations in his own life. Rarely can there have been such congruence between subject and object. The physical worlds in which his journeys in film take place are the interior realms of his spiritual quest.

A successor to his own Roublev, a commentator on our modern condition,

an icon painter in film, and a man of profound belief, it was Tarkovsky's aim to bring the inward, spiritual world into a state of harmony with the outward, material world. Perhaps more than any other, he perceived the potential of film for charting the modern space-time dimension we inhabit.

Andrei Tarkovsky died of lung cancer in Paris on the night of 28/29 December 1986. His life's work is the tree he himself planted and that, if we tend it well, may be awakened to life in the future. In the end, it was as if he had been overtaken by his own images, by the white horse recurring in his films, and by his own preoccupations with the Apocalypse and the vision of St John: 'And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death.'

PETER GREEN

A CIVILHAND ZENITH film
GARY OLDMAN ALFRED MOLINA
with **VANESSA REDGRAVE** as "Peggy"
PRICK UP YOUR EARS ¹⁸

Photographed by
OLIVER STAPLETON

Music by
STANLEY MYERS

Based on the biography by
JOHN LAHR

Screenplay by
ALAN BENNETT

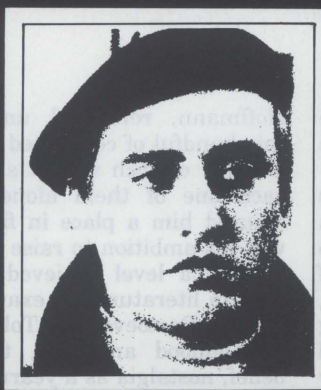
Produced by
ANDREW BROWN

Directed by
STEPHEN FRÉARS

The biography of Joe Orton by JOHN LAHR is available from Penguin Books

Released by Curzon Film Distributors. Distributed by Palace Pictures.

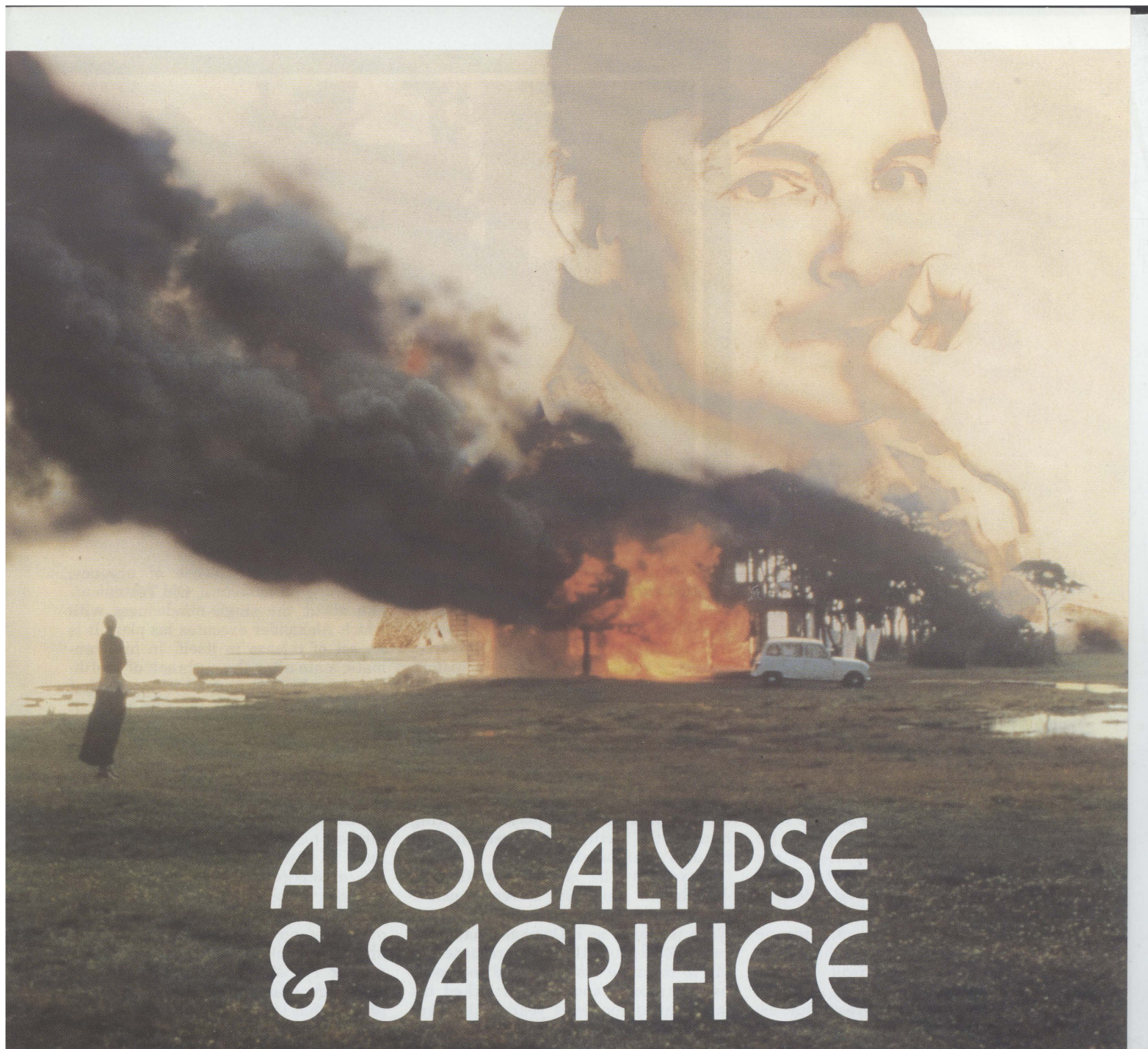
PRICK UP YOUR EARS



**THEY SHARED
EVERYTHING
BUT FAME . . .
MURDER
MADE THEM
EQUAL AGAIN**

**COMING SOON TO THE
CURZON WEST END**

Shaftesbury Avenue W1. Tel: 01-439 4805



APOCALYPSE & SACRIFICE

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumbered here
While these visions did appear.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Within a few weeks of each other in the spring of 1986, Günter Grass' *Die Rättin* was published in Germany and Andrei Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* was given its first showing at Cannes. In his novel Grass describes the time after an atomic holocaust, after the end of human time, the earth ravaged by fire storms and ashes, its landscapes pitted and filled with water and debris, encrusted with mud, cleft and torn asunder. The catastrophe at the centre of Tarkovsky's film is the outbreak of a Third World War, a final cataclysm in which 'there will be neither victors nor vanquished, neither cities nor villages, neither grass nor trees, neither water in the springs nor

birds in the sky.' In the spring of 1986 the disaster of Chernobyl burst upon us, casting its warning shadow over the world. In the final days of the year Tarkovsky died.

The convulsion that sets the machinery of sacrifice in motion in Tarkovsky's film is in fact a symbolic crisis. As we shall see, it took a different form in the original project. In a general sense it can

PETER GREEN

be seen as a product of man's spiritual plight, of the triumph of materialism. 'I wanted to show that man can restore his links with life by renewing his covenant with the source of his soul,' Tarkovsky said in an interview last March. The cause of the catastrophe that lies at the heart of the film is to be found in the state of disharmony in which man lives

with himself and with nature. The disaster that threatens the world is more a symptom of its malaise than the root of the problem. 'Sin,' Alexander philosophises, 'is that which is superfluous; and that being the case, our whole civilisation consists from beginning to end of sin.'

Alexander's sacrifice is the liberating act of a man seeking a way out of this situation, a man who sees an opportunity of becoming an instrument of human redemption. Although he himself has retired from the stage to contemplate, to write and teach, he has grown weary of words. Like Hamlet, he sees the world ruled by procrastination and idle talk. The time has come for deeds.

Alexander has gone to live with his wife and daughter in a house they had found by the sea. About him he has a small but intimate circle of friends and servants. It is there that his son, 'Little Man', was born, a latecomer and the



apple of his father's eye. Although his wife's life is evidently marred by regrets and frustrated love, to Alexander the idyll still seems intact, above all through the presence of his little son, his hope for the future.

This entire world is suddenly threatened with obliteration by a nuclear convulsion, the outbreak of a Third World War, from which there can be no escape. In a bid to avert inevitable destruction, Alexander makes a gesture of faith on behalf of mankind. Alone in the darkness, he makes a fearful vow, 'Lord, deliver us in this terrible hour. Do not let my children die, my friends, my wife... I will give you all I possess. I will leave the family I love. I shall destroy my home, give up my son. I shall be silent, will never speak with anyone again. I shall give up everything that binds me to life, if You will only let everything be as it was before, as it was this morning, as it was yesterday: so that I may be spared this deadly, suffocating, bestial state of fear.'

In the same night, Otto, the postman, comes secretly to Alexander in his room and suggests a possible way out. Alexander must go to the serving girl Maria, who is a witch with benign powers, and lie with her. Alexander complies with these instructions, and when he awakes the following morning, the threat of war has vanished.

He thereupon prepares to carry out his act of sacrifice. Sending everyone away on a fool's errand, he proceeds to burn the house down, and is finally taken away in an ambulance to silence and confinement by two white-jacketed men.

The Sacrifice reveals Tarkovsky's continued exploration of certain basic themes and at the same time represents the summation of his life's work. Loss or sacrifice by fire is a motif to be found in particular in *The Mirror* (the burning house and the burning bush) and in *Nostalgia*. Domenico's self-immolation on the scaffolding around the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome,

Andrei's sacrifice to St Catherine in the emptied sulphur pool of an Italian spa, can be seen more clearly in the light of *The Sacrifice*. In *Nostalgia*, Domenico had called for a change in universal values, a return to the point in history where man had taken the wrong path. He had poured a can of petrol over himself, perched high above the onlookers, and had taken his life by fire in the cause of a better world. At the same time, at Domenico's request, Andrei had lit a candle and borne the flame across the drained pool, ultimately expiring himself, the victim of his exertions and his own weak heart.

Played by the same actor (Erland Josephson), Domenico is very much a forerunner of Alexander. In *The Sacrifice* it is almost as if Domenico had been resurrected from the dead, returned to life to continue his work and to repeat his sacrifice. Domenico had locked his family away for seven years, held them captive in a deserted Italian hill town, until the police had freed them. (On being liberated, his son had exclaimed, 'Is this the end of the world?') The sepia scenes of this liberation in *Nostalgia*, with people fleeing along the steps of a church in the abandoned town, anticipate the two black and white inserts of a devastated street in *The Sacrifice*. In the latter case the street is littered with paper, rags and the refuse of our modern consumer society. Alexander's family is also held in a congenial confinement, in the remoteness of the northern exile he has chosen as his home; where his wife in the moment of crisis levels the accusation that she has sacrificed her own career on the stage to come and live with him here.

Through his son, Alexander hopes for a new beginning, that he too may return to that point in history where man had taken the wrong turning. But whereas Domenico had given an urgent warning to turn back while there was still time, in *The Sacrifice* it is already too late. The end is not merely nigh; the final countdown has begun.

There is a new sense of urgency, something fundamental, Old Testament-like about the single-mindedness with which Alexander executes his plan. It is an act of release in itself. In his traumatic state after the outbreak of hostilities, he whispers under his breath that he has been waiting for this moment all his life—as if deriving a perverse pleasure from the occasion that now presents itself.

The destruction of his home by fire is not the only sacrifice Alexander brings, however. His renunciation of speech is a further token of this and a recurring motif in Tarkovsky's works. Roublev's vow of silence and his abandonment of painting in protest against the senseless cruelty of the world provides a close parallel; and one recalls the speech impediment of the youth at the beginning of *The Mirror*, his liberation from which generates a sense of spiritual release that is the springing point of the film. One can interpret this as a process of growing articulacy, whereas Alexander's renunciation is in part a protest against the inflation of words, from which only his son, recovering from a throat operation and unable to speak himself at the outset, will ultimately deliver him.*

The Tree of Life

The film opens with a coloured still of a detail from Leonardo's magical, unfinished painting 'The Adoration of the Magi' (1481-2), now in the Uffizi, Florence. It forms the background to the opening credits and in a sense to the whole film. One sees the head of one of the kings, who is proffering a cup, and the hand of the Infant Jesus reaching out to touch it. After the credits the camera slowly moves up the painting, revealing Christ and the Virgin and the

* Note the reference during the conversation between Victor and Alexander to the silence Gandhi observed one day a week for much of his life.

Left: The threat of war has vanished; Adelaide (Susan Fleetwood) and Victor (Sven Wollter) before being sent by Alexander on a fool's errand.
Right: A detail from Leonardo's unfinished 'The Adoration of the Magi'.



foot of a tree held by the hands of angels. It continues to rise vertically up the trunk of this tree (as it does up the withered stem at the end of the film), past the wild, rearing forms of horses in the distance.

The picture provides a key to the film. At its simplest level, it is a depiction of a present-giving in celebration of a birthday; and it is for this reason, of course, that Alexander's guests are gathered about him on this day, Otto remarking that a gift must represent something of a sacrifice. In the figure of Christ surrounded by the Magi the picture conveys an image of naked innocence in the midst of worldly wealth. Furthermore, it is through the sacrifice of Christ that the world is redeemed, which is precisely Alexander's ambition in the film.

It would be taking the parallel too far and underestimating Tarkovsky's own breadth of vision and genius as a filmmaker to see a direct translation of the contents of the Adoration painting into another medium. Tarkovsky paid homage to Renaissance painting in general and to Leonardo in particular (as indeed he did to icon painting) in other films. But *The Sacrifice* is of a kindred spirit to the painting, and Leonardo's work contains not merely a similar central statement to that of the film, but also motifs that could be seen as specifically Tarkovskian. The sketched form of the white horse to the left of the tree is one of the director's most common fingerprints; and the portrayal of ruined architecture (which in Renaissance religious painting was often used to convey the idea of the decay of the old order, the old temple; Christ, in contrast, representing the rise of the new Jerusalem) finds its counterpart in the waste landscapes and crumbling buildings of many of Tarkovsky's films. In *The Sacrifice* the motif of decay can be seen as a token both of the decline of civilisation and the destruction the war is about to bring.

Otto finds this picture terrifying. He has a great fear of Leonardo, he

says. The picture indeed has its fearful aspects, in the awe-filled countenances of the shepherds in the foreground, and in the animated scenes in the background and the wild, primeval character of the horses.

The picture reappears on a number of occasions in the film. A print of it hangs in the house, the protecting glass reflecting Alexander in an overlaid double image, as if he were entering the picture or emerging from it, according to the play of light and the position of the camera.

The tree in the painting also finds its counterpart in the film. In the opening scene after the credits we see Alexander planting a tall, dried up tree stem. He tells his son the legend of the old Orthodox monk Pamve, who had planted a dead tree on a mountain and had instructed a novice, Ioann Kolow, to water it every day till it awakened to life. Every morning Ioann would fill a bucket, ascend the mountain and water the tree, returning in the evening after dark. Three years he did this, until one day he climbed the mountain and found the tree covered with blossom.

In this parable one can recognise allusions to the same act of faith performed by father and son in *The Sacrifice*; to the tree of life, beneath which the Virgin and Child are seated in the Leonardo painting; and to the Cross of Christ and its ultimate burgeoning with new life as an expression of resurrection. At the close of the film we see Little Man heaving two buckets along the track to water the withered stem his father has planted. Having completed his task, he lies down beneath the tree to wait. At this moment he recovers his voice and speaks for the first time in the film, repeating the words he had heard from his father at the outset: 'In the beginning was the word.' And he adds, 'Why, papa?' Again the camera rises to the crown of the tree, where there is still neither blossom nor leaf. But as if in answer to this question, the dedication to Tarkovsky's own son is faded on.

The Autobiographical Element

In *The Sacrifice*, as in other films by Tarkovsky, there are thus certain autobiographical references to be found. It is an aspect of his work for which he frequently incurred criticism, and most severely in his native country. The autobiographical element in his films ranges from the direct personal quotations of *The Mirror* to relatively allusive parallels in other films. *Nostalghia* is dedicated to Tarkovsky's mother and contains echoes from his childhood and youth. *The Sacrifice*, as we have seen, is dedicated to his son, and the thematic material—the faith Alexander places in Little Man—is a reflection of the hopes Tarkovsky himself placed in the future.

In other realms of art the inclusion of personal motifs or experience is regarded as a valid process, through which a further plane of meaning and dialogue may be established. Tarkovsky's use of autobiographical reference could be compared in painting (to which one can trace numerous parallels in his work) with the incorporation by artists of their own portraits, often discreetly hidden among the secondary figures or in background scenes. In the 'Adoration of the Magi', for example, critics have long conjectured that the armoured figure in the bottom right-hand corner is a self-portrayal of Leonardo himself as a young man.

Tarkovsky's descriptions of the development of the screenplay for *The Sacrifice* throw an interesting light on the autobiographical elements in his films, and how they are either allowed to impinge directly on the content or are transmuted and assimilated to form a virtually indistinguishable part of the overall fabric.

The initial screenplay concept, written before the shooting of *Nostalghia* and bearing the title 'The Witch', revolved about the cure of a man suffering from

cancer. In his desperation, confronted with the knowledge of an incurable disease, he encounters a strange figure (the forerunner of Otto, the postman), who tells Alexander that his only hope of recovery is to go to a woman, allegedly a witch possessed of magical powers, and to sleep with her. This he does and experiences a remarkable cure, much to the amazement of his doctor. But the witch turns up one day and stands outside his house in the rain to claim him. Alexander's sacrifice at this stage in the development of the screenplay consisted of relinquishing family and possessions and going off with this woman in the attire of a poor man.

During the shooting of *Nostalgia*, Tarkovsky was struck by a number of parallels between his preoccupations in film at that time and his own life. Andrei Gorchakov, the film's leading character, had come to Italy with the intention of remaining only a short time and had been consumed with yearning for his home; but he had been unable to return, and ultimately died in Italy. Tarkovsky himself had originally intended to return to Russia after completing the film, but had also been overtaken by illness in Italy and forced to stay. He was deeply affected further by the death of Anatoli Solonizyn, the leading actor in most of his earlier films, who was to have played the role of Gorchakov in *Nostalgia*, and who was long foreseen for the part of Alexander in 'The Witch'. Solonizyn died of the same disease that had brought the turning point in Alexander's life in the first version of the story, and 'today, years later, I too am suffering from it.'

Tarkovsky subsequently revised his treatment of this story, removing it from a realm that had become alarmingly personal, to give it a more universal validity. The autobiographical strand remains, however, inextricably woven into the texture, and the lines spoken by Alexander to his little son beneath the trees have a poignant significance: 'There is no such thing as death, only the fear of death.'

Technique and Meaning

One has come to recognise certain recurring stylistic features of Tarkovsky's direction, personal fingerprints and structural devices. Over the years he came to refine and extend these to a point where they have acquired a semi-otic content of their own.

The relationship between the iconography of his films and that of classical painting, the use of identifying attributes, the citation of the four elements has been observed elsewhere.* The generation of sounds, the quality of the camerawork, lighting and choreography, and the dramaturgical use of certain characters all serve to illuminate areas that are not otherwise expressed in the pictures or dialogue.

Tarkovsky developed the use of a

differentiating colour code to a fine degree from its first appearance in *Andrei Roublev*. There the entire film was shot in black and white. Only the closing sequences, after Roublev has revoked his vow of silence and returned to painting, are in colour, celebrating his icons and murals. This key was used in subsequent films with increasing subtlety to distinguish between various realms, states of mind, or times. The use of such a code in this film will be considered in greater detail later in conjunction with the analysis of the ultimate significance of Alexander's sacrifice. At this point it is sufficient to remark that Tarkovsky here employs three levels of colour to distinguish between present reality, other time,

dream and vision. This complexity is heightened by the fact that the range of colour used is limited in extent. The film is shot in the pale light of Sweden, where even the daylight scenes are of low contrast; furthermore, the indoor waking scenes are relatively subdued in colour, with the result that the transitions between the different realms are often slight, almost imperceptible, creating deliberate ambiguities that reflect the multi-layered quality of this film and its possible interpretations.

Manifestations of the four elements recur in Tarkovsky's works. In *The Sacrifice* water and fire predominate. He himself referred to water as a mysterious element that is extremely cinegenic, that conveys a sense of movement, depth

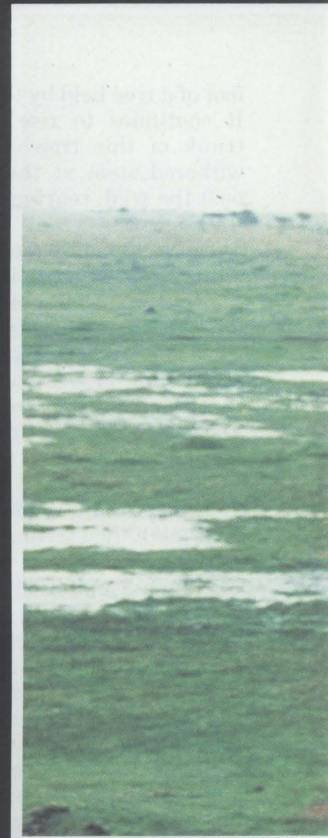


Above: Little Man (Tommy Kjellqvist), 'he dare not be woken'.

Right: Alexander (Erland Josephson) on his way to silence and confinement.

Below right: Maria, the witch with benign powers (Gudrún Gísladóttir), and Adelaide (Susan Fleetwood).

Below left: On the devastated street people flee in fear.



* See my article 'The Nostalgia of the Stalker', SIGHT AND SOUND, Winter 1984/85.

and change; but that accounts for only one aspect of its presence in his films. In *The Sacrifice* he uses it not merely as an atmospheric background or context (the sea or the waterlogged earth), but as a specific iconographic element within the film, conveying images of life and growth and purification. Fire is of a similar visual quality, but it is also associated with ideas of light and purgation, and in this case comes to represent the central vehicle for Alexander's sacrifice.

Other personal Tarkovskian motifs are also to be found. The occurrence of mirrors, and of doors that swing open on their own; the trembling glasses, the image of spilt milk, the condensation of breath on the window pane, the pictures

of the little boy asleep, the bloody nose, the phenomenon of levitation are all familiar from previous works, and in particular from *The Mirror*. Personal allusion and intrinsic content become one.

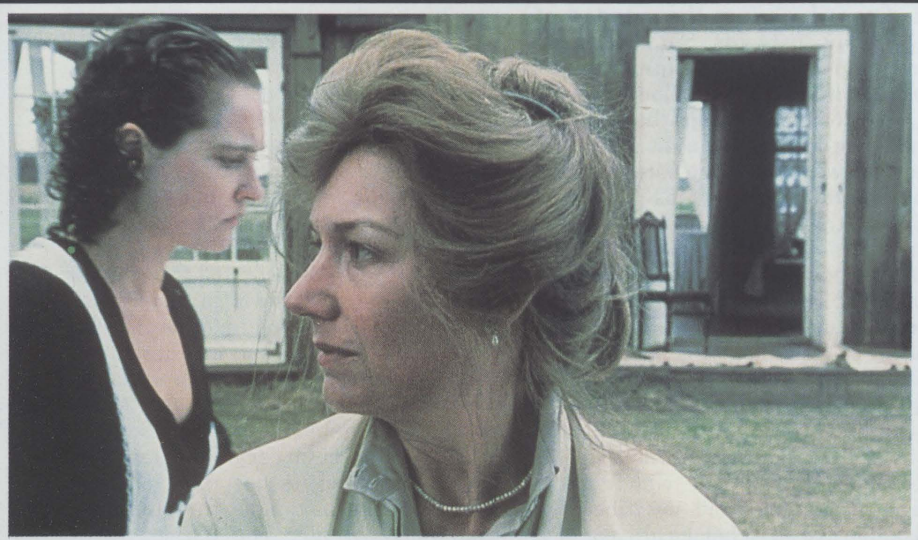
The extraordinary visual quality of this film is in large part due to the camerawork of Sven Nykvist. If *Nostalgia* was distinguished by slow zooms in and out, the striking feature of *The Sacrifice* is the use of parallel tracking and the pan. Here too camera movements are almost imperceptibly slow, and many of the uncut scenes remarkably long. (In this context, it will suffice to mention the opening two sequences and the fire scene at the end.) The lateral movement of the camera,

together with the choreography of the figures, creates an exceptional sense of space. An example of this is the garden scene after the nightmare has passed. Victor and Adelaide are seated at a table in front of the house. The camera moves slowly to the right, the focus imperceptibly shifting from the foreground to explore successive planes of depth and activity, finally allowing a view through the doorway, through the entire house to the garden beyond; and as if by chance, one observes Alexander slipping unseen out of the house at the back. The viewer is in two worlds at the same time: listening to the conversation at the table and also party to Alexander's secret design.

The sense of space is enhanced both by the spare furnishing of the interiors and the careful control of lighting. Changes of light within a single scene (as in Little Man's bedroom), or classical chiaroscuro effects, in which one sees merely the expressionistically half-lit face of Maria, for example, are among the most striking aspects of the use of lighting. The tone is nevertheless subdued throughout, the night scenes often barely lit. The camera scarcely seems to move; and this still austerity creates a tension, a sense of space and movement that is one of the most remarkable achievements of the film and one of Tarkovsky's outstanding contributions to the grammar of cinema.

The collage of visual references is echoed on the plane of aural composition; and despite the spare use of music, this expression is not out of place. As in *Nostalgia*, Tarkovsky orchestrates the visual element with a host of suggestive sounds. Only at the beginning (to the Leonardo picture and the credits) and at the very end does he use music as a background, extraneous to the film. In both cases one hears a passage from Bach's St Matthew Passion. The other brief incidences of music in the film are integral to the action; i.e. both the Japanese flute music, which Alexander plays on his stereo set, and the organ prelude that he plays in Maria's house are 'live', in the sense that they are motivated by and occur within the action of the film. They are not effects added on from outside.

The soundtrack accompanying the dialogue and images is of quite another nature. Here Tarkovsky refined the technique of *Nostalgia* even further. The composition of sounds near and far, present, past or even future, in reality or dream, counterpoints the visual stream, forming a further layer of meaning that claims almost as much attention as the pictures. The sounds of the sea and gulls and the foghorn in the night establish the basic context against which the action is set; they are to be heard for much of the film. The rumble of thunder and the sounds of trembling glasses herald the approaching cataclysm and the blast of the planes roaring past overhead, shaking the whole earth. One hears the window shutters outside Little Man's bedroom swinging in the wind, opening and closing, and modulating the light in the room as they do so; and in





Left: Otto the postman (Allan Edwall) with his birthday present for Alexander. Right: Maria pours water over Alexander's hands.

the night, when Alexander cycles to Maria, one hears the familiar bark of a dog. Throughout the scene in Maria's house the passage of time is documented by the loud ticking of a clock; and at the close of the film the great fire is accompanied not merely by the crackle of the flames, but by the splintering and crashing of beams, the shattering of falling glass, explosions within the house, the telephone grotesquely ringing amid the conflagration, and the strings of the piano finally snapping with awful resonance.

Perhaps the most significant sound in this score is, however, the voice of the shepherd, as one might describe it. The strange voice the writer hears from the house in *Stalker*, warning him not to proceed, or the voice of God that Andrei hears in *Nostalgia*, here reappears in the form of a shepherd-like call, half cry, half song, recurring at turning points in the drama. It first occurs near the beginning, when Alexander and his son are sitting beneath the trees, Alexander philosophising about the world. Little Man slips off out of sight and Alexander notices the boy's disappearance in alarm. The call recurs, and when his son steals up on him, Alexander's reaction is one of shock or fright. He lunges out, accidentally striking the boy in the face, causing his nose to bleed. The scene is followed by Alexander's black-out, in which the vision of the devastated street appears for the first time. The cry recurs later in the house, after Otto has told his strange tale and is inexplicably struck down. We hear the voice of the 'shepherd' once more, after Alexander's terrible vow alone in the darkness of his room; and again when Otto visits him in the night to advise him to go to Maria. On this occasion they are aware of the cry, but do not know what it is. It is a cry of warning or exhortation, perhaps the voice of God or the silent call of Little Man, so faint and fleeting that one can never be entirely sure it is any more than a shepherd calling to his flock in the night; and yet, when Alexander

turns back on his way to Maria, having fallen from his bicycle and hurt his knee, it sounds again, as if in admonition. Whether or not Alexander hears it consciously on this occasion, he turns once more and continues along the path to Maria's house.

Finally, mention should be made of the way Tarkovsky uses certain figures as pivots for the drama. Two characters in particular have a catalytic function in this film: Otto, the postman, a foil to Alexander; and Maria, who has a relatively small role but who appears at vital turns in the action.

Otto can be seen as providing the comic element in the film. He is a Puck-like, mercurial, ambivalent figure, constantly springing surprises with his unexpected aphorisms and naïve wisdom, much like the clown in a play by Shakespeare. It is he who philosophises with Alexander in the opening scene on fundamental existential questions, referring, much to Alexander's surprise, to the dwarf who had overcome Zarathustra—only to become the victim of Little Man's practical joke in the same scene and to be laid low a few scenes later by his own 'evil angel'.

It is Otto who brings the grandest of the birthday presents, an enormous framed map of Europe. Alexander assumes that it is a reproduction of an old print. An original would be far too valuable for the postman to give him. But as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Otto confirms that it is indeed a 17th century original and adds that any present has to be something of a sacrifice, otherwise what sort of present would it be? It is he who perceives the frightening aspect of Leonardo's picture. Asked by Victor about his background, Otto replies that he has given up his work as a history teacher to come here and concentrate on other things, and that he only works as a postman 'in his spare time'. It is Otto who collects strange phenomena and describes the remarkable parapsychological case of a

mother and son who had been photographed together; shortly afterwards the boy was killed in the war, but inexplicably reappeared in a photograph the mother had taken of herself many years later. Otto is the key to the supernatural world of this film. It is he who comes to Alexander in his night of despair and tells him that Maria, the house-help, is a witch from Iceland, possessing benign powers; that Alexander's only hope of rescue is to go to her and lie with her.

It is through Maria that Alexander finds deliverance. She is a figure of many parts—mother, eternal womanhood and Virgin Mary all rolled into one. The parallels to the Madonna in the Leonardo painting are reinforced by the attributes with which Tarkovsky endows her. On Alexander's arrival at her house, one hears the bleating of sheep and sees a flock of lambs running backwards and forwards along the front of the building in the darkness. Inside the house one sees a group of objects forming a still life picture in black and white: a cross, a mirror, old photographs. Finally, Alexander, who has fallen into a puddle on his way there, washes his hands. Maria pours water from a jug into a bowl and over his hands, giving him a white towel with which to dry them. The ewer, the water and the towel denote purity and, like the lamb and the Cross, are common Marian attributes used in Renaissance painting. Similarly, the mirror, the ticking clock and the photographs are familiar vanitas symbols of transience. The memento mori is here juxtaposed with tokens of eternal life.

Alexander proceeds to tell the story of his mother's overgrown garden, which he had attempted to put in order, but the spirit of which he had in fact destroyed. This whole scene is filled with maternal references. When finally he asks, 'Could you love me, Maria? Save me! Save us all!' she tells him to leave. But Alexander places the pistol he has removed from Victor's bag to his temple, threatening to take his own life. The glasses rattle



The sacrifice is that which one generation brings to another...

again, and the jets thunder past overhead. The shepherd-like call is heard. In their union, in the moment of deliverance, one sees Maria and Alexander swathed in sheets, turning, hovering above the bed in an act of levitation, bride and groom of the winds, mother and child, recalling perhaps the levitation scene and the pregnant mother in *The Mirror*, and the Child in the arms of the Madonna.

The visionary black and white scene of the devastated street returns, now filled with people fleeing in fear. The camera retires over their heads, to the glass balustrade, in which one sees the reflections of tall buildings above. On this occasion, however, the camera retreats even further, revealing the sleeping child. The shepherd's song-like call recurs and a series of brief images follows: Adelaide seated on the grass with the sleeping figure of Alexander; the 'Adoration of the Magi' picture; finally, a short sequence in which Alexander's daughter is seen naked, chasing chickens from the corridor of the house; the last flickerings of the dream.

The dream is over and Maria disappears from the scene until the very end, when Alexander suddenly becomes aware of her presence, standing there watching the burning house. He falls to his knees at her feet, kissing her hands, before being taken away. But as the ambulance describes a broad curve past the house and turns on to the track, Maria grabs the bicycle lying in the grass and cycles off, taking a short cut towards the withered tree stem. There one sees her for the last time, united momentarily in a single picture with Little Man and Alexander, before their ways finally part.

The Relevance of the Sacrifice

The dream is over. One sees Alexander sleeping on the couch, the electric light burning next to him. He wakes; almost imperceptibly the picture fills with soft

colour and light. The nightmare is banished, as he slowly comes to ascertain. The electricity and telephone are working again, and a call to his publisher confirms his hopes. It is as though nothing had happened. What then is the sense of Alexander's sacrifice? In the aftermath of the dream certain parallels with the events of the night manifest themselves. As if it were a reminder, Alexander stumbles into the piano, hurting his knee, just as he had when falling from the bicycle on his way to Maria.

In our modern world Alexander's readiness to sacrifice seems something of an anachronism. The age of sacrifice came to an end long ago; and yet, faced with destruction, he is prepared to abandon everything to accomplish the mission of his heart and save his little son and mankind.

In the first edition of his book *Sapetchatlionnoye Vremya*, which was compiled when the film was still in the project stage, Tarkovsky described his leading figure as a weak person, not a hero in the conventional sense of that word, but an upright, thinking man who brings a personal sacrifice for his high ideals. His actions are not merely performed with determination, but reveal a destructive despair, despite the fact that he risks incurring the misunderstanding of those nearest and dearest to him and although he is aware that he may be regarded as a madman. Alexander is not the master but the servant of his fate.

This distinction is significant, yet it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the two in reality. Alexander's fate is at the same time his mission; his opportunity to take the stage again in the service of mankind. History has shown, however, that this kind of fatalism and a determination to fulfil it can prove disastrous in its own way. Alexander's calling does indeed verge on what society regards as madness; and although he may claim to have saved the world, his sacrifice is not confined to himself alone. Although he takes steps

to exclude Victor from material loss and to keep everyone out of harm's way, he inevitably drags those closest to him into personal tragedy. Alexander's deed is not merely a self-sacrifice. It has something of a sacrificial offering about it.

A small price to pay, one might say, for saving the world; but at first sight Alexander's sacrifice seems superfluous and too programmatic. He has woken from a nightmare and the world is in order again. Only a lunatic would burn his house down now, surely. In fact, this turn of events provides an illustration of Tarkovsky's genius. In previous films one has seen how he goes to the borders separating the natural from the supernatural, always finding an explanation for strange circumstances that allows them to remain within the bounds of physical law. Having entered the Zone in *Stalker*, one of the men takes a direct route towards a house, despite the stalker's urging that they should follow a more circuitous course. Suddenly the man, the writer, hears a voice forbidding him to come closer. He turns in his tracks and rejoins his companions. The stalker finds a natural explanation for what at first seems to be a supernatural manifestation; he suggests that the man had been afraid in his own heart to go any further and had created the audible warning himself to save his face. This and similar devices, to be found in particular in *Stalker* and *Nostalghia*, became a personal fingerprint of Tarkovsky's work. Ultimately they are formulations of the idea of belief, which is a major element of all his films. Just as the journey into the Zone may be seen as a quest for belief, so the casting of the bell in *Andrei Roublev* by a young boy who has never done the work before and the miraculous delivery from certain destruction in *The Sacrifice* are fundamental statements of belief.

Confronted with a global war, Alexander is forced to his knees in an act of humility and repentance. He grasps for God, promising to sacrifice everything and to take a vow of silence, if God will

avert the catastrophe. But how can a process of universal destruction, once set in motion, be reversed by the prayers of a recluse? How can Alexander's strength of belief be demonstrated in a plausible manner that still observes the natural laws of the world in which the film takes place? Alexander's plea is granted. The inevitable holocaust is averted by the seemingly simple device of turning the catastrophe into a dream, from which Alexander now awakes. This is not a banal, sentimental trick, but a stroke of genius; and when Alexander, at first scarcely trusting his fortune, slowly reassures himself of the fact, he does not back out on his vow, but acknowledges this wonderful dissolution of his horror into a dream from which he may awake as an act of God, as God's active but unseen answer to his prayers. It is no mere happy coincidence and release. More than ever he must honour his vow, even if this means incurring the misunderstanding and despair of others. To keep faith and to preserve his own peace of mind, he is prepared to risk appearing insane in the eyes of the world.

In view of the 'last chance' Otto presents him with, one might of course ask whether Alexander's sacrifice was really necessary. Having sworn to forsake all worldly possessions and relationships, he is suddenly confronted with the promise of redemption through Maria. Is this an immediate answer to his prayers, the response to his vow, or is it an alternative to sacrifice? One might equally ask, in view of Alexander's readiness to honour his pledge, whether God might not have intervened at the last moment to prevent him carrying out his terrible deed, just as He had stopped Abraham taking the life of Isaac. Both questions are, however, irrelevant. There can be no room for doubt in Alexander's mind; a failure to act would be a return to the prevarication he abhors; and a direct intervention by God would invalidate the very rule the film has established.

The supposition that this whole central episode is but a dream is supported by a number of circumstances: by the many references to sleep; by the irrational, dreamlike actions that occur; and, more conclusively, by Tarkovsky's use of a differentiating colour code. The entire central nocturnal section of the film, from the time Alexander goes out into the garden to seek Little Man and finds Maria and the model of the house, to the time he wakes on the couch in the morning, is cast in the form of a dream and is photographed in darkly lit sequences virtually devoid of colour. The everyday waking reality of beginning and end is painted in the pale, natural colours of a northern summer, framing the interior world of the dream. There is also a third level of photography: the black and white or sepia sequences of the visions, or of scenes from other times, past or future, inset into the coloured reality or into the dark-hued central section.

Maria therefore stands at the beginning and end of this dark dream, the entrance to which is via the model of the house set on the blasted earth and built as a birthday present by Little Man himself and Otto. In embarking upon this apocalyptic midsummer night's dream, Alexander enters a labyrinthine realm, akin perhaps to the Zone in *Stalker*. The fact that he may awake and find the world as it was before, does nothing to lessen the horror of the vision. If anything, it demonstrates the truly nightmarish perspective of Shakespeare's own play.

Alexander's sacrifice is a parable, perhaps a vision in itself; a sacrifice we may all be called upon to make one day, the relinquishing of a materialist, expansionist world order, upheld by exploitation and nuclear power, a world of international rivalries that verge on armed conflict; a sacrifice in favour of love and a belief in a different future. Is it possible, however, for man to turn back short of the holocaust Grass describes in his book and Tarkovsky in his

film? The mere threat of one would seem to be insufficient.

That this glimpse into the abyss 'no more yielded but a dream' seems certain. But one must ask whose dream it was—Alexander's or Little Man's? As in *Ivan's Childhood* and *The Mirror*, much of the film is as if seen through the eyes of a child. Furthermore, the sleeping child motif recurs throughout the film. Little Man sleeps through the entire night-war section; indeed, he dare not be woken. The dream has to be dreamt. In the second of the devastated street scenes in black and white one catches a glimpse of the little boy asleep again; and finally, at the end of the film, he lies down beneath the tree, his work done, perhaps to sleep and dream, and bring the story full circle, back to its starting point. Is the film Alexander's dream of his son, or Little Man's dream of his father; vision of the past or of the future? Past and future are fused together or are ambivalent; it is a feature one may observe in other films by Tarkovsky. The sacrifice is that which one generation brings to another, Alexander for Little Man, Christ for God.

In true Tarkovskian manner identities merge. Like the fair-haired boys in earlier films, Little Man, whose recovery of speech represents the end of Alexander's vow of silence, is his father's continuation or his alter ego. Otto's collection of strange phenomena echoes in the mind. The unity of time and place comes full circle. But this is only one of the cycles in which the film abounds, and to which Otto refers in his debate with Alexander by the sea at the beginning.

Perhaps Alexander's apocalyptic vision is but the unhappy dream of a child. Tarkovsky allows us to view the world from both ends of the telescope; and in both cases what remains is the future. Perhaps 'the tree of life, which is in the midst of . . . paradise' will bloom and Alexander's sacrifice, whether it took place in reality or in the imaginings of his little son, will not have been in vain. ■



Andrei Tarkovsky
and Little Man (Tommy Kjellqvist).

Stills on pages 112-117 taken from the frame by Schirmer/Mosel Verlag, Munich, whose Andrej Tarkovskij—Das Opfer-Filmbuch, containing 120 colour illustrations and the script of *The Sacrifice*, was published in February.

SHEPITKO



Larissa Shepitko (left) directing *You and I*.

Between the poles of servile Soviet hacks and militant dissidents lies a range of behaviour for which we in the West have virtually no vocabulary. And the lack of words signals a lack of comprehension. The pejorative term 'official dissident' cautions that Soviet disinformation seeks to create the illusion that freedom of critical expression exists in the USSR. But are the men and women there who work near the bounds of acceptability to be dismissed as manipulators, dupes or tokens—and, if not, what are the alternative expressions? To discuss Larissa Shepitko, a Soviet director who died at the age of forty in 1979, is to confront this problem.

In the sixteen years between her graduation from the State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow and her death, Shepitko became one of the rising stars of Soviet cinema. The careers of her somewhat older contemporaries Andrei Tarkovsky and Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky suggest that this is not an easy position. As the most important art (according to Lenin), Soviet cinema is one of the most controlled, and the bureaucrats in charge of it have been some of the least adventurous in the USSR. A person with integrity who must compromise to make films will be under continual moral stress. Shepitko's biography suggests that she tried to make fewer compromises and that she suffered from those she made.

In the New Wave-ish feature *You and I* (*Ty i ya*, 1971) several compromises were

in fact required of her. According to Ron Holloway, writing in *Variety*, a ten-minute segment with a monologue that set the film's direction was dropped. She 'had to take into consideration the authority of [director Mikhail] Romm who told her to change an episode that was important for the movie,' explained a critic in the Polish journal *Kino*. After completing *You and I*, Shepitko apparently spent four months in a state of

Karen Rosenberg

mental and physical exhaustion and spent time in hospital with a heart problem.

'The director admits that the unpleasant episode taught her a lesson,' said a piece in the Czech magazine *Film a doba*. 'In the future she wouldn't believe anyone and wouldn't doubt her intuitive judgment. She asserts categorically that in film work she will not follow any authority, with one exception. Aleksandr Dovzhenko remained an unshakable model for Shepitko.' Dovzhenko, her teacher at the State Institute of Cinematography, taught that film-makers must be faithful to themselves and stand up for their own views, she told an interviewer for *Soviet Film* in 1977, adding, 'I, for one, have not always been able to

do that.' Compromise seems to be flexibility, but if you say that you'll make it all up in your next film, you'll lose your path, she says in the posthumous documentary about her, *Larissa* (1981). In interviews, Shepitko often repeated Dovzhenko's dictum that you have to approach each film as if it were your last. And her most famous film, *The Ascent* (*Voskhozhdeniye*, 1976), concerned the slippery slope of compromise with the Nazis.

And yet Shepitko's independence should not be exaggerated: she spoke of cinema as a weapon of ideological struggle—and this in the first half of the 1970s, when many Soviets in the arts chose not to reiterate that traditional theory, preferring silence. But when she defined the propaganda function of art in moral or spiritual rather than political terms, she allied herself with more liberal elements. She told the French journal *Ecran* that her nation's identity is the result of its great spirituality, so this vital principle must not be forgotten in this century. Shades of Tarkovsky.

In describing such a mixture of orthodoxy and integrity, it is all too easy to emphasise one component at the expense of the other. Perhaps an example will capture the balance: Shepitko's final feature, *The Ascent*, an adaptation of a rather controversial piece of Soviet fiction, Vasil Bykov's *Sotnikov*. This novel, written in Byelorussian but published in Russian in the journal *Novyi*

mir in 1970, attracted attention in the USSR and abroad for its novelty. (It was translated, not entirely successfully, into English as *The Ordeal*.) Although about a standard subject in Soviet literature—the Second World War—it contained relatively complex portraits of three collaborators in occupied Byelorussia: Rybak, a partisan caught by the police serving the Germans; Pyotr, a village elder who must act as spokesman before the fascists; and Portnov, an interrogator at the local fascist headquarters. Under Stalin, literature, like law, was never very understanding of anything that smacked of treason, and the reasons for traitorous actions did not generally receive sympathetic treatment even in the post-Stalin era. Bykov's prose, by departing from that norm, implicitly criticised it.

But it wasn't only the refusal to draw black or white characters that made Bykov a much discussed author in the USSR. His moral tales reminded atheist readers of religious parables. Sotnikov, a sick and wounded partisan also captured by the pro-German police, ascends into heroism under torture as his comrade Rybak sinks into collaboration. A few Soviet critics praised Bykov's depiction of martyrdom, but others attacked his 'loss of realism'.

In this context, Shepitko's decision to put *Sotnikov* on the screen was another declaration of her liberal stance within the political and artistic establishment. An interview in the Soviet journal *Iskusstvo kino* in October 1976 demonstrated her awareness of the debate over Bykov. And by changing Bykov's title she signalled which side of the debate she was on: precisely those spiritual and non-realist aspects of *Sotnikov* that had been criticised were going to be present in *The Ascent*. The young actor Boris Plotnikov, who plays Sotnikov, is unmistakably Christ-like—his upturned face is often bathed in light, as in many a religious painting. 'There is a moment when, in great pain, he falls among some bushes and is shown in agonising close-up, appearing to wear a crown of thorns,' noted critic Nina Hibbin. 'Rybak is something of a Judas, and Sotnikov's long, ritualistic walk to the hilltop where he is to be executed has obvious parallels with Calvary.' By depicting Sotnikov as a lamb of God, Shepitko risked being criticised in the USSR, as Bykov had been, for lack of realism. And she was—in *Iskusstvo kino*'s review of *The Ascent* in September 1977.

Yet for all her Christian symbolism, Shepitko makes it clear—clearer than Bykov—that the source of resistance to the fascists was not the gospels but Soviet socialism. (She was right when she told *Ecran* that Bykov's story makes more allusions to Christ and Judas than did her film.) Pyotr, the religious village elder, is a less important and less sympathetic character in the screenplay by Shepitko and Yuri Klepikov. And, in the end, Shepitko's Sotnikov turns into a model patriotic hero. On the way to the gallows, he asks Portnov to free those who will also be hanged. 'Is

that all, citizen Ivanov?' responds the interrogator, to whom Sotnikov has never revealed his name. The prisoner answers:

No, I'm not Ivanov. I'm Sotnikov. A commander of the Red Army. Born in '17. A Bolshevik. A member of the Party since '35. A teacher by profession. When the war began I became commander of a battalion. I should have slaughtered more of you vermin. Sotnikov is my name, Boris Andreyevich. I have a father, a mother, a homeland.

In Bykov's novel, Sotnikov delivers no such stirring speech at this moment.

To influence viewers, Shepitko told an interviewer for *Cine Cubano* in 1975, film-makers must first affect their emotions and then, through the heart, their minds. 'Any method of propaganda related only to the conscious and rational faculty and which only afterwards appeals to feelings is much less effective.' Paradoxically, both the power and the limitation of this director lay in her ability to press emotional buttons. On the one hand, she was brave and forthright, willing to expose her passions and beliefs. However, she could push too hard, so that a viewer might well be left feeling manipulated. The scene in *Sotnikov* in which a little boy catches the eye of the hero on the gibbet is inflated by Shepitko. She cuts back and forth between them: the boy begins to cry, and Sotnikov smiles. She washes the child in light, etherealising him. Here is Sotnikov's past and also his future; in this boy's memory, he will find immortality and a reward for not having given in to the enemy. Nothing is left to the viewer's imagination.

'We wanted the moral of the events being related to be as lucid as possible and to be clearly and easily perceived by every person watching the film,' the director told *Iskusstvo kino* in 1976. Two years later, she explained the film's Christian imagery to an audience in Berkeley, California: 'We were trying to choose the quickest road to reach the intelligence and hearts of all viewers.' This may be her problem. Shepitko's stroke is broad and strong (Romm and various Soviet critics referred to

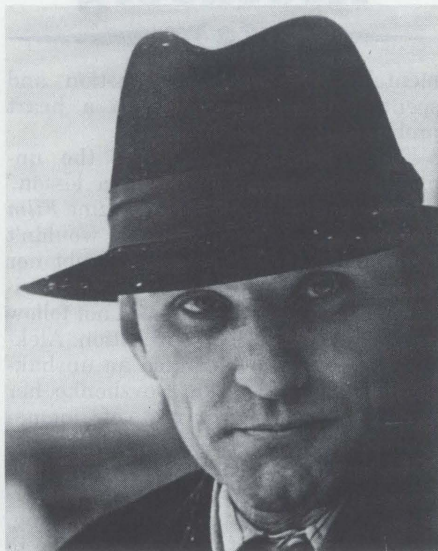
her style as 'masculine', revealing their gender stereotypes) but can lack subtlety. Apparently that choice was deliberate, for she also told *Cine Cubano*, 'We have an audience with very diverse intellectual levels and that's why it would be an impermissible luxury for us to address only the superior strata of the mental aristocracy which could be most able to comprehend everything through analysis and rational argument. We must always remember that cinema is an art for the masses.'

The theory that a complex and intellectual cinema is elitist and lacks power is belied by another part of *The Ascent*: the cat-and-mouse interrogation of Sotnikov by Portnov. It's a *tour de force*, reminiscent of Raskolnikov's conversations with prosecutor Porfirii Petrovich in *Crime and Punishment* and Alyosha's philosophical dialogues with the amoral Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky was one of Shepitko's favourite authors, and there is more of him than of Bykov in this scene. Portnov, played by Andrei Solonitsyn (who appears in many of Tarkovsky's films), is the cynical foil to Sotnikov's idealism. He makes the other collaborators in the film look soft, so the audience may forgive them much. That this is only implied is so much the better, for if a director trusts the viewers, they can rise to the level of the film.

'I think that to understand Bykov's creative method it helps a lot to study the poetics of Dostoevsky,' Shepitko told *Iskusstvo kino*. Looking at *The Ascent* in that light, one might also detect some Dostoevskian self-abasement in Rybak's efforts to defend his collaboration and in his unsuccessful attempt to hang himself. Rybak, as played by Vladimir Gostyukhin, is weak rather than evil—more to be pitied than censured. In fact, he is one in a long line of Shepitko characters whose pathetic behaviour seems designed to embarrass viewers. In *Wings* (*Krylya*, 1966), the heroine comes uninvited to her adopted daughter's apartment and interrupts a pleasant party with her forced gaiety. *You and I* contains a strange and unforgettable scene in which a research scientist, falling in love with his friend's wife, volunteers to play the stooge in front of her in a circus act. Like Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment* and Fyodor Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov*, these film characters make your skin crawl. And that's a rare art.

The Ascent won first prize at the 1977 Berlin Festival and brought its director international attention. Just when her talent was being applauded, Shepitko died in a car accident, with members of her crew. She was shooting her next feature, to be based on another new and talked-about novel: Valentin Rasputin's *Farewell to Matyora*, which appeared in a Soviet journal in 1976. The tale of a Siberian island due to be buried under water by a hydroelectric dam, it had been attacked as pessimistic: the heroine, Darya Pinyegina—a grandmother who refuses to leave Matyora where her

The Ascent: Andrei Solonitsyn.



ancestors are buried—expressed the author's one-sided hostility to progress, some Soviet critics thought.

Shepitko had completed only 600 metres of her film, to be called *Matyora*, when she was killed. And though her husband, director Elem Klimov, took over the project, he and his brother reportedly rewrote her scenario. A new title signals the transfer of hands: his film is called *Farewell* (*Proshchaniye*). Completed in 1982, it was, like Rasputin's book, called gloomy—and perhaps that is why it was not released for foreign distribution until 1986, although Cannes had requested it earlier. In October, it was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as part of its touring series 'A Salute to the Soviet Republics'. In the States for the beginning of the tour, Klimov noted that *Farewell* had been shown so quietly in the USSR 'that hardly anyone saw it.'

Shepitko's *Matyora* might not have received this response: an article in the Soviet anthology *Ekran 1979-1980* reveals that, with Rasputin's permission, Shepitko planned an upbeat ending for her film. In Rasputin's novel, Darya's son is prevented by a dense fog from taking his mother and a few other faithful islanders off *Matyora*, which is about to be submerged. 'I think that contemporary man doesn't need the apotheosis of sacrifice and the incontrovertibility of life's tragedy,' Shepitko is reported to have said. 'Rasputin's heroes have other sides of their characters which can be developed in another direction.' In the final shot of Shepitko's film, light would bathe Darya's face and her eyes would express that her son had found her.

Were the life-affirming ending of *Matyora* and Sotnikov's defiant speech in *The Ascent* concessions to pressure from film bureaucrats? It's equally possible that Shepitko had internalised the limits of Soviet cinema—and they are narrower than those of Soviet literature, in part because movies reach much larger audiences. Perhaps the deviations from the literary texts were palliatives, designed to make problematic works less threatening. But it is also conceivable



The Ascent: Boris Plotnikov.

that Shepitko's happy endings and inspiring moments were sincerely felt. To me at least, her quoted remarks seem so emphatic and impassioned that I rather doubt they were the product of careful calculations. She sounds like a believer, and what she apparently believed in was the need for art that would help the USSR build a society without the rigidities of Stalinism. For some, that is a lot to hope for; for others, not enough. In that middle position is where this director probably stood.

A critique of Stalinism is visible in many of Shepitko's films—if one sees Stalinism not just as a political term but as a

psychological stance. A fascination with despots is present even in her diploma film for the State Institute of Cinematography, *Heat* (*Znoi*, 1963). Here, too, the film draws on a literary work: a short story by Chingiz Aitmatov, called 'The Camel's Eye', that appeared in *Novyi mir* in 1961. It concerns a young man named Kemel who has volunteered to cultivate the torrid steppe of Soviet Kirghizia. There he meets a mysterious shepherdess and learns to drive a tractor. (Yes, on one level, it's the old boy-meets-girl-meets-tractor story.) And, in this tale, Kemel falls into conflict with one Abakir, the petty tyrant of the agricultural brigade.

The figure of Abakir, played by Nurmukhan Zhanturin, dominates the screen. The cameraman (Yu. Sokol) often films him from below, so he assumes hyperbolic, intimidating proportions. Septical about the possibilities of growing anything in this unfriendly climate, Abakir is especially hostile to Kemel, a bright-eyed member of the Komsomol (or Young Communist League), played by Bolot Shamshiyev. The youth ultimately wins the battle of wills and, in the final shots, Abakir leaves the brigade. But this ending cannot dispel the disquieting awareness created by *Heat* that injustice is alive in the world and naive young people are often its victims.

In *Heat*, wrote a Polish critic in *Kino*, Shepitko 'showed the psychological repercussions of the period of mistakes and wrongdoings.' That's the Polish euphemism for the Stalinist era. In the post-Stalin thaw, Abakir 'couldn't find himself in the new conditions'; and, the review continues, Nadezhda Stepanovna Petrukhina, the heroine of *Wings*, is similarly bound to 'old dogmas: the "only right" judgments'. Under censorship, many Eastern Europeans and Soviets have mastered the filmic equivalent of reading between the lines. Occasionally they can hint in print at what they have perceived—and it's well worth reading their reviews for those moments.

An article in *Iskusstvo kino* (October, 1966) also notes the Stalinist characteristics of Nadezhda Stepanovna: a

Heat.



Farewell.

'Komsomol goddess of the 30s' is what L. Lazarev dubs her. A pilot in the war era, Shepitko's heroine was inculcated with the military ideals of service and obedience and has not managed to adjust to peacetime. But, as another writer points out in the same issue, 'The years of our people's tremendous heroism were also, at the same time, the years of injustice.' For 'injustice', read 'Stalinism'.

Nadezhda Stepanovna, the severe principal of an engineering school, is a recognisable type. Her sexual puritanism (she disapproves of her adopted daughter's relationship with an older man), her lack of compassion towards rebellious students and troubled colleagues, and her smug dedication to work mark her as a hard-liner. Like Tarkovsky in *The Mirror*, Shepitko was concerned about the way Stalinism had permeated everyday relationships. No wonder *Wings* was controversial in the USSR. One of its Soviet defenders hastened to point out that people like Nadezhda Stepanovna were deviations from the healthy norm—exceptions to the rule.

Maya Bulgakova, an actress who gained in reputation through this role, is not afraid to look dowdy: with her hair and suit as neat as a pin, she assumes a military bearing and speaks through clenched teeth. But flashbacks suggest what gentleness Nadezhda Stepanovna might have shown had her lover not been killed in the war, and the scene in which his plane is shot down before her eyes creates especial sympathy for her.

Now entering middle age, Nadezhda Stepanovna has some spontaneity left: after waltzing with a woman friend, she laughs, abandoning her rigid self-control. But the main transitional scenes take place in a historical museum where a little boy, looking at Petrukhina's picture, asks if she too perished in the war. Nadezhda Stepanovna, having overheard the question about herself,

tells her one male friend that she will resign her job and asks him to marry her; she doesn't want to be a museum piece, she asserts. 'Did she perish?' she wonders, referring, it seems, to her spiritual self. So Shepitko prepares us for the symbolic final sequence when the heroine takes out a plane without authorisation and ascends to the skies again. Another happy ending.

This fairytale transformation glosses over the thorny question of how to de-Stalinise the human personality. Yet for all that it did not say, *Wings* was an important film. The fact that Shepitko presented Petrukhina's absolutism as a defect is noteworthy—before 1956, such a character might well have been offered as a role model, wrote the Polish critic in *Kino*. Dissident feminist Tatyana Mamonova—who was shipped out of the USSR in 1980—remembers Nadezhda Stepanovna as a Soviet Rosie the Riveter, useful to a nation at war but laid off in peacetime to make room for men; *Wings* for her was a happy sign that the problems of Soviet women were finally being noticed.

Heat, too, touched on the position of women. The film, like Aitmatov's story, shows Abakir's patriarchal oppression of his young lover, but why this attractive woman accepts such treatment becomes a major riddle of the movie. Commanding female figures like Petrukhina and Darya Pinyegina also fascinated this director. But Shepitko's feminism sounds nineteenth century: she thought that women's strength lay in the emotional and spiritual sphere. In *Larissa*, Elem Klimov's short film elegy to his wife, she is heard saying that a woman's cinema can speak about psychology.

It is true that psychology made Shepitko's films more than the usual Soviet movie on war or agriculture. The extremes of nature—the frigid winter in *The Ascent* and the inhuman sun in

Heat—bring characters near the breaking point where, she thought, they show their true colours. 'Faced with death, the human being does not dare lie,' she told *Ecran*. This may be why she had Pyotr, the hero of *You and I*, quit his cushy job as a doctor at the Soviet embassy in Stockholm and take off for Siberia: there, confronting the elements and a young woman's attempted suicide, he could decide what life is for. The hero's jumbled state of mind is mirrored by the lack of chronological ordering of scenes. And Shepitko said she turned to colour—for the first time—for its emotional effect.

Like *The Ascent*, *You and I* is about moral choices; and here, too, the hero makes the politically correct one in the end. Pyotr, played by Leonid Dyachkov, decides that he must return to scientific research to find a treatment for the disease of one of his Siberian patients. (This message is made abundantly clear through intercut scenes with an experimental dog that suffers from the same illness.) What's noteworthy is not the renewed dedication of the hero to socially useful work, but Shepitko's patience with his long search, which strains his wife and colleagues. You don't see many sympathetic pictures of mental breakdowns coming out of Soviet studios.

There may be some surprises, however, if the cultural thaw in the USSR continues. Last May, at the Fifth Congress of the Soviet Film-makers' Union, Elem Klimov was elected first secretary—the top union post—reportedly with the support of younger union members and of Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife Raisa. How much will change under Klimov remains to be seen, but among his first accomplishments was the release of about thirty banned films, including Shepitko's *The Homeland of Electricity* (*Rodina Elektricheskaya*, 1967), based on a short story by a still controversial Soviet writer, the late Andrei Platonov.

In the current Soviet climate, one might expect to hear Shepitko's name. The prose she adapted for the screen is by men who are still among the leading liberal Soviet writers. Aitmatov, Rasputin and Bykov are very popular authors, in part because their style is not terribly experimental and their ideas not dangerously daring, but also because—as Andrei Voznesensky said last July at the stormy Eighth Writers' Congress—'the reader trusts them'. Although members of the establishment, they have deviated enough from the clichés of socialist realism and raised enough questions about Soviet values to be considered not hacks but artists.

The same can be said of *Larissa* Shepitko. ■

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Wings: Maya Bulgakova.



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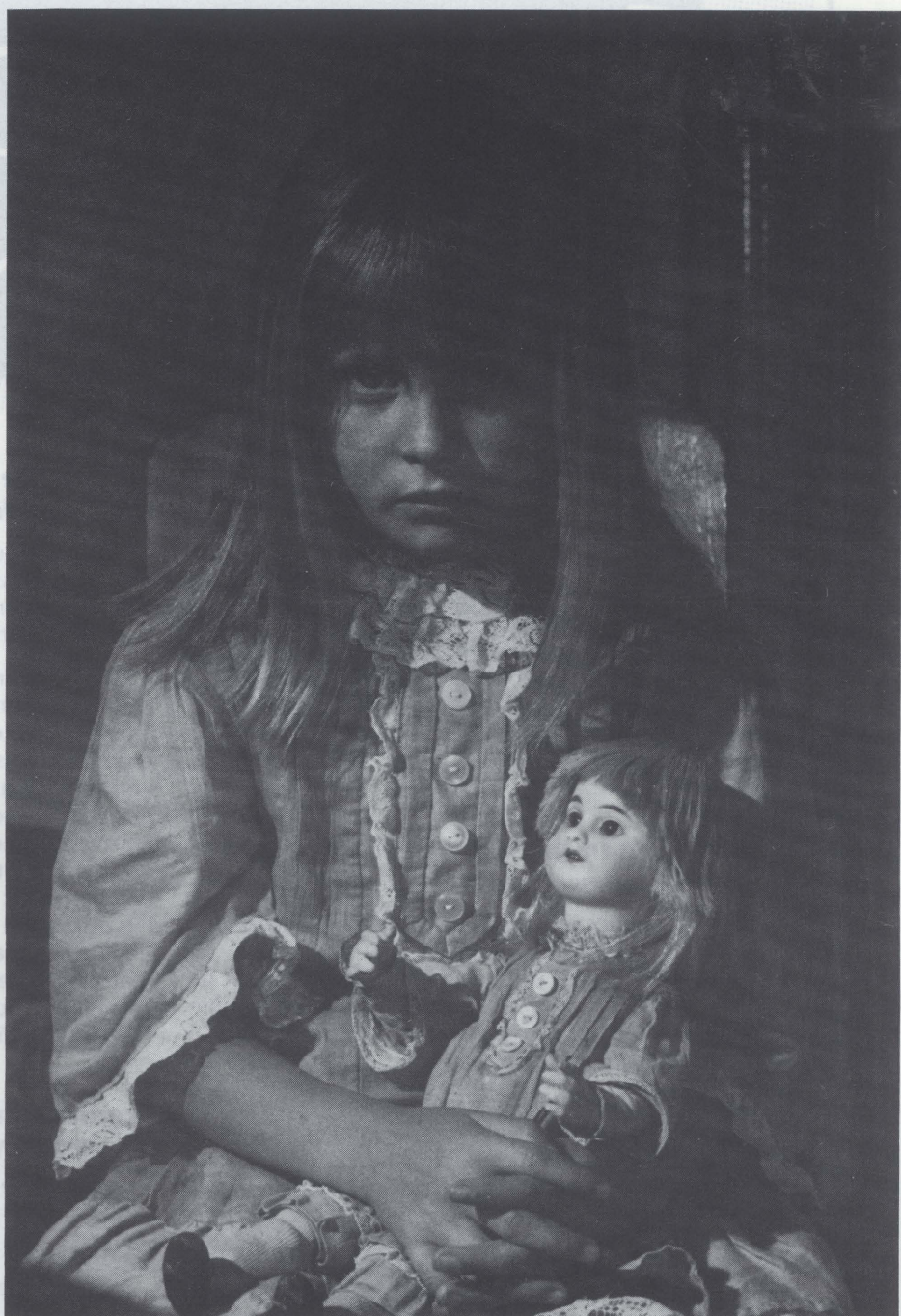
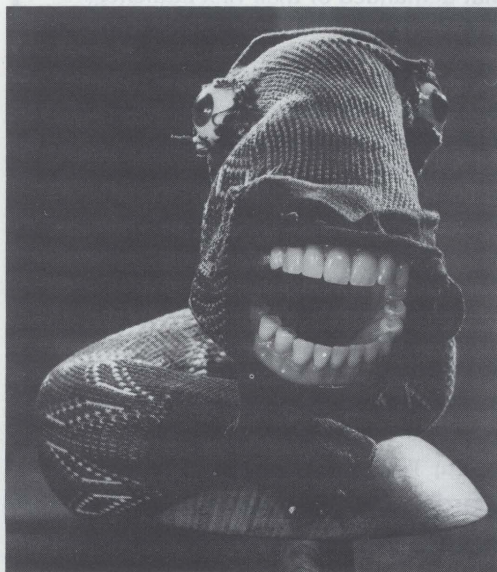
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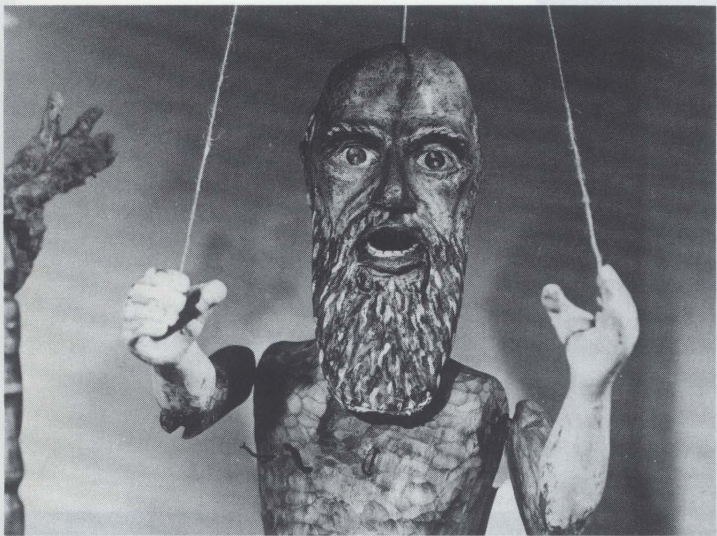
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ALICE

in Czechoslovakia

Jan Švankmajer, the award-winning Czechoslovakian animator, paid homage to Lewis Carroll in *Jabberwocky* (1971). Now, in Prague, he is preparing a feature-length film inspired by *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Švankmajer's nightmarish short *Down to the Cellar* was clearly a pilot for *Alice*, his first feature, and the director is again using live action and his own unique brand of puppet and object animation. *Alice* is a co-production of Condor Films (Zurich), German TV's Hessischer Rundfunk and Britain's Film Four International; the producers are Michael Havas of Frankfurt and Keith Griffiths, a regular collaborator with the Brothers Quay; animation is by Bedřich Glaser and photography by Svatopluk Malý.





Left: Kristinka Kohoutova as Alice.

Bottom sequence: Bedřich Glaser (crouching, 2nd from right) puts the White Rabbit through its paces; Jan Švankmajer (3rd from right) stands outside the animation tent.

PHOTOS: MARTIN PROCHÁZKA and (Alice) SVATOPLUK MALÝ.





Left: Percy Toplis (Paul McGann) helping a comrade.

Right: In the trenches.

Below: Percy Toplis, the Monocled Mutineer.

PHOTOGRAPHS: ROGER LONG.

Over The Top

Julian Petley

The question 'What is History?' has vexed practitioners of the subject for a considerable time and is still a matter of heated academic debate. However, the subject was thrust firmly into the public arena in Britain last autumn by press and Tory party reaction to the four-part BBC series *The Monocled Mutineer*, written by Alan Bleasdale of *Boys from the Blackstuff* fame.

When the series was first in production, the BBC advertised it as 'a four-part drama freely based on real events', but unwisely changed its tune in the advertisements that appeared in the press just before the first episode's transmission. These promised us 'the enthralling true life story of Percy Toplis'. During production *The Monocled Mutineer* received a favourable press. The trouble began on Saturday 13 September, when the *Daily Mail* devoted two pages to an article purporting to expose its historical errors. The pages also contained an editorial entitled 'The Big Lie', which claimed that the series 'twisted and fictionalised a segment of British history from a left-wing viewpoint', accused the BBC of 'cynicism and irresponsibility', of being 'engaged in a long-term operation to rewrite history because of its hatred of our Imperial past' and of perpetrating 'the myth of Percy Toplis as a working-class revolutionary dedicated to overthrowing a widely hated aristocratic establishment,

even though there is hardly a single fact to support it.' The same day, the *Daily Telegraph* published a statement by the series' historical adviser, Julian Putkowski, that the films were 'riddled with errors', though it also allowed the producer, Richard Broke, to defend his series.

By 15 September the storm had really broken. A leading article in the *Telegraph* accused the BBC of 'shameless fabrication', while the *Express* leader spoke of 'distortion and class war propaganda'. Elsewhere prominence was given to complaints by Tory MPs such as Neil Hamilton (who was about to bring a libel suit against the BBC over a *Panorama* programme which claimed to link him with the far right) and Nicholas Soames, the latter denouncing it as 'an absolute fabrication' and adding that 'it suits the BBC, with its left-wing bias and determination to mock everything in authority, to rewrite history in this way.'

The *Mirror* and the *Morning Star* both published editorials defending the programme, and in the *Guardian* Hugh Hebert examined 'this weekend's attack by the right wing press'. The following day the *Guardian* published a leader (this makes six in four days, surely some kind of record for a television programme) defending the series and attacking 'the BBC bashers of Fleet Street'. Meanwhile, the *Mail* returned to the fray by quoting military historian Douglas Gill, co-author of *The Unknown Army: Mutinies in the British Army in World War One*, as accusing the BBC of committing historical errors that amount to 'substantial falsifications'.



The most intemperate attack, however, came from Paul Johnson in the *Daily Mail* of 1 October. In an article entitled 'Utterly Biased, Morally Bankrupt, Politically Corrupt', Johnson described the series as 'another piece of agit prop to inflame class hatred and denigrate Britain . . . it [the BBC] not only lies, it lies for the Left. It not only rapes, it rapes for the Revolution.'

Strong reactions indeed. One may well agree that the BBC was guilty of faulty labelling—indeed Bleasdale himself said that the advertisements 'really put the wind up me.' However, did this mistake warrant quite such a reaction? And a reaction which subsequently coloured—or distorted, one might say—all press coverage of the series. And why should *The Monocled Mutineer's* war-is-hell message cause such a rumpus in a



society which has produced, without much fuss, such anti-war classics as *King and Country*, *How I Won the War*, and *Oh! What a Lovely War*, to name but three?

The answers to these questions take us both inside and outside the series. Outside because the newspapers' criticisms cannot be detached from a campaign that was being waged by sections of the Tory party and Tory press to agitate for a tough right-wing chairman of the BBC Board of Governors. Indeed the *Mail*, *Express* and *Telegraph* all made this clear in their editorials and the *Mail* actually named Lord King as its choice. This in turn is linked to a general distaste for the BBC among the Tory press as a public institution imbued with a perceived liberal ethos and staffed by an unwieldy bureaucracy. Indeed, it can be clearly demonstrated that *The Monocled Mutineer* affair is far from being the only stick that sections of the press have wielded against the BBC over the past few years.

It should also be pointed out that the controversy is linked to a long-running debate about the documentary-drama form, and the legitimacy of mixing fact with fiction. This debate goes back at least as far as *Cathy Come Home*, and its other major landmarks are *Days of Hope*, *The War Game* and *Death of a Princess*. More recently, a BBC film about Anthony Blunt has figured in the controversy. The debate is, of course, a perfectly proper one, but it must be admitted that it is generally mobilised in a highly selective fashion, and tends to cloak political/ideological objections behind a

mask of apparent ethical/aesthetic concern. As Ken Loach has noted: 'Criticisms about confusing fact with fiction are reserved by certain papers for political films but ignored when Edward VIII or Churchill's mother are romanticised and glorified.'

As far as the argument about *King and Country*, etc, is concerned, it has to be pointed out that a) most of these films were produced in a considerably more liberal ideological climate and b) these are not television programmes. One has only to note the fuss caused by the showing of films such as *Scum*, *Jubilee* and *Sebastiane* on television to realise that different standards are applied to the two media. Recent controversy over 'video nasties', and the introduction of the Video Recordings Act, reinforces the same point, as does the production of 'television versions' of certain cinema films. In other words, as far as television goes, a 'not in front of the children/servants' view still predominates in certain quarters (a view which, of course, also dogged the cinema in its early, and not so early, days).

The BBC series *The Monocled Mutineer* had its genesis in a book of the same name published in 1978 by William Allison and John Fairley. In it they tell the story of Private Percy Toplis, a young miner from Nottinghamshire and something of a tearaway and con-man, who joined the Army in 1915 and was soon up to his old tricks, impersonating officers and generally treating the authorities with derision and contempt. But, according to Allison and Fairley, his real

crime, the one for which he was to be hunted down and killed two years after the end of the war, was his involvement in the mutiny at the base camp at Etaples in 1917. It is worth pointing out that the book's veracity was never attacked until the TV series was made; in 1979 BBC Scotland based a half-hour programme on it which passed without comment.

Until Fairley and Allison published their book, little was known about either Toplis or the events at Etaples: indeed it is their contention that the existence of both was deliberately hushed up, and that the reason Toplis was hunted to death with such determination was to avoid the publicity of a court martial in which the truth about Etaples would inevitably emerge (it is also their contention that, for the same reason, major participants in the mutiny were rapidly sent to a part of the front from which they would probably not return alive).

Firm facts about Toplis were hard to come by. When the authors, and later the film-makers, visited Penrith (near where Toplis was killed) in pursuit of information, they met a lack of cooperation not to be explained just in terms of fading memories. The gun with which Toplis was killed was thrown into a river immediately afterwards and never recovered; Toplis was interred in private after press and public had been tricked into believing the funeral was to be at another time; and the body was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave. Even more intriguingly, Toplis' revolver and the original print of him lying dead disappeared from Penrith police station's

'black museum' just at the time when Allison and Fairley were conducting their investigations and opening old wounds. In this respect, the fact that Toplis' tongue was cut out after his death (for cosmetic reasons, as he had apparently half bitten it off in his death throes) takes on a decidedly symbolic resonance...

Facts about the mutiny were even scarcer. The events at Etaples had been acknowledged here and there, but could hardly be regarded as well known, familiar or part of the accepted history of World War One. The most significant mention was in an article entitled 'Mutiny at Etaples Base in 1917' in *Past and Present: A Journal of Historical Studies*, November 1975, which was later reprinted in *The Unknown Army*. But official sources provided very little. The Public Record Office contains the base commandant's War Diary (this figure too plays a major part in both book and films). Otherwise the government made its first Parliamentary admission about events at Etaples in 1978 (after the book's publication) in a written reply to the then Labour MP Eric Moonman.

This reply reveals that the records concerning two boards of inquiry could not be traced and had probably been destroyed (at that time such records had to be kept for only ten years). Furthermore, files containing the personal records of those at Etaples had been destroyed along with many others in a warehouse fire in London's Walworth Road during an air raid in the Second World War. Other records may not be made public until 2017. Faced with such official stonewalling, Allison and Fairley placed advertisements in local newspapers in the areas in which they knew regiments involved in the Etaples affair were recruited. They asked for first-hand recollections, and the response was overwhelming. It was on these and other first-hand experiences that they based much of their book.

But the troubles at Etaples were

known enough for them to have attracted the interest of film-makers before *The Monocled Mutineer* appeared. In the early 1970s there had been an attempt to make a feature film about the mutiny, but this did not involve Toplis at all; it was to be called *Bullring*, to be directed by Michael Apted and star James Mason as Horatio Bottomley (on whom Kenneth Grahame modelled Mr Toad). Again this would appear to be a piece of dramatic licence, since the only reference to Bottomley's involvement with military unrest relates to his being asked to come to Folkestone in 1918 by thousands of soldiers discontented with their conditions and looking for a champion. The *Bullring* project fell through, though it was later twice submitted to the BBC and twice rejected. Intriguingly, one of the projects which Alex Cox tried to get financed in the wake of the success of *Repo Man* was a film about Percy Toplis called *Out of Order Percy*. In the light of the fuss and furore over *The Monocled Mutineer*, Cox's remarks on the film's failure to find financial backing are telling: 'MGM declined to make it because, they said, it was "too English, too expensive and too anti-war". I don't know how it is possible to be "too anti-war", except that Reagan had become President by then and war had once again become an admirable occupation for young men' (*Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1984).

Oddly enough, for a series that was such a huge popular success (viewing figures of 10m), *The Monocled Mutineer* took some time to get off the ground. It was originally in the hands of John Purdie, who interested Alan Bleasdale in adapting the book. 'It had all the elements that give you an opportunity for good drama,' Bleasdale says, 'but there were two other reasons for wanting to do the story: one is that my father's father died in Northern France in 1917 before my father, the last of 11 children, was born. He knew he was going to die and his last

letter home is heartbreaking, so writing this was a very emotional thing for me. And secondly it was the knowledge that the history I'd read for O and A level was not the history of ordinary people, it was the history of the statesmen, the kings and the generals. Bismarck smoked 10,000 cigars: that is what I learned from history at school. I also thought that if I got it right I could say something about the bleak times we live in now, that cannon fodder is always cannon fodder, however much you are told that things have changed, be it in the Falklands or on the dole queue.'

Suggested directors at this time were Karl Francis, and also Marek Kaniév-ska. The project was in the hands of the Special Features Unit (responsible for *Threads* and *Oppenheimer* among others), but there were problems about the size of the budget, Bleasdale believing it to be too low and refusing 'to recreate World War One with three men and a tent.' After lying fallow for a while, the project acquired a new producer, Richard Broke (whose previous credits included *Kate*, *the Good Neighbour*, *Minor Complications*, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and also *Churchill: The Wilderness Years*, which contains some interesting parallels with *The Monocled Mutineer*). It was Broke who appointed Jim O'Brien as director, whose credits included half the episodes of *The Jewel in the Crown* and also *Shadows of Our Skin* and *Jake's End*. Thanks to Broke's persistence, the budget grew from £1.2m to £2.8m. Remarkably, this was achieved without recourse to co-production monies.

'I don't want to do historical drama for its own sake,' Broke said. 'What interests me in going back into the past is its relevance and links to today. Of course, the contemporary resonances must not be too crude, one does not want to bang the audience over the head with them. But at the same time I want to get away from the idea that period pieces have to be set in some kind of distant aspic. L. P.

Good works:
Lady Angela Forbes
(Penelope Wilton).



Hartley had a lot to answer for when he said 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' When people think of the past they tend to see it through the distorting lenses of old movie clichés and imagine that somehow that is "the past" rather than just a certain kind of image of it.'

Not surprisingly, Jim O'Brien was offered several military and period pieces after *The Jewel in the Crown*, but nothing struck him until he saw Bleasdale's script. As he put it: 'Certainly I was interested in the contemporary resonances, but also I was keen to use the great strengths of Alan Bleasdale as a storyteller to get into the guts of the ordinary soldier in the trenches. We wanted to follow through the implications of that famous remark about the First World War being a case of lions led by donkeys. We were not trying to make an overtly political series but one which said: "Let's look at it from *their* standpoint, let's see how *they* felt about it all".'

The series' contemporary resonances, and its attempts to tell history, as it were, 'from underneath', bring us back to considering the intrinsic qualities—as opposed to the external circumstances—of *The Monocled Mutineer*. I would suggest that these mark it off as being more than simply 'anti-war' in the liberal-humanist tradition of *Journey's End*, etc, and that the quite exceptional venom reserved for the series in certain quarters is partly a recognition of this fact. Even a fairly cursory reading of the press attacks will reveal that beneath an apparent concern with the 'truth' of the series lies an objection to what is taken to be its ideological viewpoint. But was this actually as 'left-wing' as the papers claimed?

Before trying to answer this question, or rather as a prelude to it, let us consider the films' contemporary resonances. These go a long way beyond the cannon fodder parallels mentioned by Bleasdale.

There is, for example, a chilling scene in which Edwin Woodhall, the Secret Service man put on Toplis' trail after Etaples, visits fellow mutineer Charles Strange shortly after the war, when Strange is standing as Labour candidate for Bermondsey. Woodhall threatens to disclose Strange's wartime exploits unless he withdraws, and the scene includes an exchange in which Woodhall reveals that he is employed by the government. 'And what if there was a Socialist government?' asks Strange. 'I don't deal in dreams,' replies Woodhall. But of course their future is our past and we know the 'dreams' actually came true. We also know that Harold Wilson alleged on several occasions an MI5 plot against him (a claim backed up since the series' transmission by Peter Wright in the Australian courts and frequently raised in Parliament during the last few months); and many other sources, from E. P. Thompson to Cathy Massiter, have alleged that the security services have targeted legitimate left-wing organisations as 'subversive'. Furthermore, Bermondsey is the seat in which Peter Tatchell stood for Labour, and lost, in one of the dirtiest election campaigns, in which every trick in the book was used to ensure that he lost.

As Richard Broke indicated, however, most of the resonances are not that overt and have more to do with atmosphere and suggestion. Crucial in this respect is the casting of Paul McGann as Toplis, an absolute masterstroke since the actor (who first came to fame in the BBC TV series *Give Us a Break*) is both wonderfully believable as a First World War soldier and at the same time a decidedly contemporary figure. I put this point to Jim O'Brien. 'When people say that Paul looks "modern",' he replied, 'what they're touching on is the way in which characters from World War One have been traditionally portrayed, which is like trying to understand the working class by looking at an Ealing film. What we tried to do with the kind of actor we had

in Paul and the kind of writer we had in Alan was to cut out all that surface crap. It wasn't an attempt to get his look absolutely "right" but to get an immediate sense of a young man with a certain kind of energy, a certain kind of life force, struggling against the context of the war. It is less a question of going for "period feel" and more a matter of doing it in such a way that no 17-year-old kid in the street would have any difficulty identifying with him. This is not to say, however, that he is the "hero" of the piece, because in a sense he is actually some kind of anti-hero.'

So what does the writer have to say? 'Toplis is a hero for our time, that is to say, he is lacking in heroic characteristics. If he were alive now he would continue to be even more fervently apolitical, or possibly even a perfect example of Tebbit's philosophy of Get on Your Bike. Indeed, it is no coincidence that I make Percy take a bike journey to London, when in all honesty he would never have cycled that far and would have found a way of arriving in much greater style. I wanted to show someone who, through his family circumstances and through society as it was then (and continues to be now), had very few opportunities to show his true light, to succeed in any way other than the one he chose. He is a boy who at seven or eight closed all the doors. There is a Vernon Scannell poem, *First Fight*, in which he says "Whatever might cry out is hurt or dies." The minute Percy begins to care, when he falls in love, he can't pull the same callous strokes as he did before, and he dies.'

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Toplis is his indefinable chameleon quality, which means that one's expectations and moral judgments are constantly confounded. His nature emerges in the opening scene, in which a judge says of the seven-year-old, 'His schoolmaster testifies mainly to the boy's confidence and arrogance,' but a



The modern face of the First World War.

telling close-up of the accused child's face as it slips slowly beneath the bar shows only eyes full of fear, withdrawal and apprehension. Then, after a birching, this is replaced by a look of blazing defiance. But the most striking scene illustrating Toplis' ambiguity is the one in which he visits the mother of the officer he has seen horrifically executed by firing squad for desertion. With devastating irony, but also real emotion, he leads her to believe that her son died heroically in action . . . and then 'borrows' £5 off her.

Such is the welter of nicknames and pseudonyms and disguises, so numerous the confounded expectations and contradictory traits, so abrupt the character changes, that it seems—increasingly as the films progress—that perhaps there is no 'real' Toplis at all, just a succession of masks and assumed roles. The archetypal post-modern figure? Perhaps, but certainly the ultimate pragmatist, the character who chooses to be whatever is most convenient and best suited to survival, essence-less and geared only to action. If he is a hero, or anti-hero, then perhaps he is best described as an existential one. As Toplis' friend Geordie puts it to the pursuing Woodhall, 'If you want to know, he was a hero. He did not seem like one, or act like one, you never knew what he was thinking, or which way he would go, and you never even knew till it had happened. And then you knew.'

It is also worth pointing out that many of the other major characters are almost equally ambiguous, and mistaken identities, disguises, performances and illusions abound throughout the films. Dorothy, with whom Percy falls in love, is virtually his mirror image and an accomplished con-woman in her own right; Woodhall appears to be a doting and attentive father; and most spectacularly, in one of the films' finest scenes, General Thomson, the ogre of Etaples, is suddenly revealed in a very different light. In an extremely tense, moving and beautifully acted solo, Timothy West

reveals that Thomson was once a relatively liberal Commandant of the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. However, his methods displeased the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Thomson was given a public dressing down. 'And I returned to King's Regulations, to the very letter of the law.'

The one thing that Toplis most definitely is *not* is a socialist. Jim O'Brien describes him rather nicely as 'a Tebbitite with a heart of gold'. It is here that the papers' descriptions of the films as 'class war propaganda' and the like seem most grotesquely off beam. Only Lucy Hughes-Hallett in the *Standard* (22 September) and the leader writer in the *Mirror* (15 September) seemed to have any inkling of the issues at stake here. Thus the former: 'The character of Percy Toplis, anti-hero, represents as much of a challenge to simplistic Left-wing myth-making as it does to the romanticism of the Right.' And the latter: 'Those who voted Labour out of admiration for him would have a peculiar idea of what socialism is about.' Indeed. The series' one major socialist is Strange, and like the two committed socialists in *Boys from the Blackstuff*, he has a hard time of it. 'That's because it is hard work to be a socialist,' says Bleasdale. 'It is far easier to cut and run, to have no conscience, like Mr Tebbit's alleged idea of the Tory voter.'

Strange and Toplis define themselves in opposition to each other in several key scenes. For example, the following exchange which takes place near the deserters' camp in Episode 2:

TOPLIS: Listen. If you're talking politics, talk to someone else with your grammar school ideas. It's politics got us into this sodding mess.

STRANGE: And it's politics that'll get us out. The politics of socialism. I'm a socialist.

TOPLIS (cynically): But of course, I mean, aren't we all . . .

This theme continues when they reach

the camp, as Strange, commenting on a visit to the hospital, remarks: 'Well, we had to help ourselves a little, here and there,' and Toplis comes back with, 'Of course. As I was saying—if that's what socialism is, we're all socialists.' And again when Geordie tells him, 'There's thousands of us all over these woods, we help each other,' and Toplis replies, 'I'd rather help myself.'

It is only during the mutiny that Toplis seems to see some virtue in collective and principled action. As he puts it at the beginning of the third episode, with the mutiny in full swing, 'I don't know what's got into me today. I'm feeling all sort of . . . honourable.' Even Strange notices Toplis' sudden enthusiasm and says, 'You really love this, don't you?' The reply has a decidedly 1980s punkish ring to it: 'Yeah. And you know why, Strange? 'Cos it's all bollocks . . . And I don't care.' 'Oh, yes, you do,' says an unconvinced Strange. In fact it is not the last time that Toplis is almost convinced by Strange's way of doing things. At their last, fated meeting, after Toplis has listened to Strange delivering a stirring election address, he remarks, 'You were very good in there, you know. In fact you were . . . great. A great man. You even had me convinced . . . almost.' He then relieves him of £100, and the lifelong pacifist Strange clouts him. And with the mutiny over Toplis returns to his old egocentric ways. Recalling his part in the whole affair he asks, 'What did I do? I was just having a laugh.' Significantly, it is his reputation as a militant organiser, rather than the reality of his role in the mutiny (actually shown to be quite limited) which causes him to be hunted down with such diligence.

Similarly, it is the aura of heroism that attaches itself to an unwilling Toplis among the rank and file that leads to his final downfall. Thus, when he re-enlists in search of anonymity among the confused postwar mass of soldiery, his reputation (already much embellished and



Right: General Thomson, 'the ogre of Etaples' (Timothy West).

Far right: The end of Toplis.

mythologised) goes before him and ensures precisely the opposite; and it is only out of a desire to impress his hero that the fawning, sycophantic Fallows shoots an aggressive black-marketeering taxi driver who is trying to pull a fast one on Toplis, and thus precipitates the final tragedy. Indeed, this whole episode neatly vindicates Toplis' remark on one of the occasions when he's called a hero: 'That's the last thing I am . . . Cemeteries are full of heroes!'

If Toplis is not presented as a socialist, neither is the mutiny presented as an organised uprising. As General Asser puts it to Lady Angela Forbes, 'Deserters and cowards don't start revolutions. And the English don't care enough. Not the lower classes anyway. Otherwise they wouldn't allow themselves to die for King and Country and Empire.' And to Thomson, whom he clearly blames for the shambles, he remarks: 'This is not, I suspect, political—more . . . personal.' Certainly the way in which Jim O'Brien directs the scenes of mutiny accentuates their disorganised nature: the general effect is of a confused, resentful, boisterous and occasionally brutal and violent mêlée rather than a revolution in microcosm. Admittedly the odd red flag is to be seen—but outnumbered by the skull and crossbones.

As Bleasdale put it: 'I tried to make it clear that the mutiny, like the Brixton and Toxteth riots, wasn't politically motivated although it also happened because of politics, because of the condition of the people, which is brought about by political factors. The mutineers were like the rioters—they were just fed up, had had enough and hit back. Toplis is in no way a socialist, although Strange is, but he isn't the central character, nor in any sense a mouthpiece or exemplary. I suppose he is as near as I'd go to putting my own personal beliefs in a piece, which is probably why I killed him off! I don't want to stand up on a soapbox and preach to people, any more than I

want to be preached to. Did you know that a lot of Militants are lapsed Jesuits? Well, I went the opposite way. What my films are saying is not think this or that, but think for yourself, here's a different view of history, think about it. But in the end I don't think the press reaction to the piece had much to do with its intrinsic qualities. They were out to get the BBC with anything that came to hand. I have this idea of *The Monocled Mutineer* walking across a zebra crossing, and the BBC juggernaut is heading one way and the Conservative juggernaut the other, and the Conservative juggernaut goes right across the road, smashes into the BBC juggernaut and kills Percy Toplis on the crossing just when he thought he was safe. But of course it is a sign of our bleak times that anyone who expresses any concern for cannon fodder and humankind is castigated as some sort of dangerous revolutionary.'

Bleasdale's remarks about history are interestingly amplified by Jim O'Brien: 'Historians are terribly jealous of their territory, and papers like the *Daily Mail* managed to capitalise on this. The idea that people might tell a verbal history, might talk about an event which historians feel belongs to *their* specialisation, is extremely offensive to them. They become absolutely fact-obsessed, though this is often just a means of disguising the fact that they feel the values being portrayed are offensive. But if you talk to ordinary people, the people who wrote in to us after the programmes, they do not feel it is offensive, they know the First World War was a mess. There is something about the way Alan Bleasdale tells the story that you feel contains a kind of truth, or, as Bill Cotton put it, "the greater truth".'

Clearly this is an issue on which feelings run extremely high, and which is rather more complex than both sides allow. On the one hand, we have the BBC giving a hostage to fortune by labelling its product wrongly and thus denying

its artists the perfectly proper defence of dramatic licence. On the other, a number of newspapers which, with precious little understanding of historiography, have tried to erect some kind of distinction between 'Real History' and *The Monocled Mutineer* in both its forms. But in a mirror image of their assailants' methods the creators of both book and series have also tended to assume that there is only one way of writing history. What both sides seem to fail to grasp is that history is not a homogeneous discipline and is itself riven by schism and controversy—in particular over questions to do with the status of personal testament and memory, and the function of written records, official sources and the like.

The arguments advanced by *The Monocled Mutineer's* various creators in fact relate very closely to the whole Popular Memory debate (which spread into film culture in France with Foucault's critique of *Lacombe Lucien*) and the question of oral history. Interestingly, the problems of the very act of recording history are foregrounded in the scenes in which Thomson and Lady Angela Forbes argue, interspersing their quarrel with instructions to the clerk making a record of the conversation. And although Douglas Gill may have disagreed with certain factual aspects of the scenes at Etaples, the overall impression (the greater truth?) of the scenes of mutiny as envisioned by Bleasdale and O'Brien is remarkably close to that conveyed in *The Unknown Army*.

Unfortunately, these and other fascinating issues became submerged in the hysteria whipped up over the series. What a pity that none of those involved remembered E. H. Carr's dictum in his marvellous *What Is History?* 'The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate.' ■



Katia Ricciarelli, Placido Domingo
in Zeffirelli's *Otello*.

Film-makers were trying to put opera on the screen even before the movies could talk. In the mid-1920s, King Vidor made a silent version of *La Bohème* with Lillian Gish and Robert Wiene shot *Der Rosenkavalier* in Germany. He even persuaded Richard Strauss to cobble together a medley of the opera's best tunes especially for use in the cinema.

Sixty years and many failures later, film-makers are still at it. Luigi Comencini has been working on plans for a new film of *La Bohème*, this time with the black soprano Barbara Hendricks. For mid-1988, there is also a project to film *Boris Godunov*, with Ruggero Raimondi in the title role. There's many a slip, but pencilled in at the moment as director is Andrzej Wajda. Opera, especially after the critical kudos and fair commercial success of Francesco Rosi's *Carmen* and Franco Zeffirelli's *Otello*, is flavour of the moment.

Yet film and opera have seldom been easy bedfellows. Those who love one often loathe the other and find the prospect of a marriage anathema. The prize, though, must be worth winning for people keep on trying to capture it. Most opera films fail not through any want of sympathy or streak of vulgarity on the film-makers' part (accusations that opera buffs often level at them) but through a fundamental misconception of the differences between the two media and of the common ground where success is most likely to ensue. It is no coincidence that those directors of opera films like Hans Jürgen Syberberg and Michael Powell who would have no truck with realism have come closest to licking the challenge. Syberberg's *Parsifal* and Powell's *The Tales of Hoffmann*, however controversial in detail, are self-sufficient as cinema while preserving the artifice and ritual of operatic form.

Opera films fail most conspicuously when the director attempts to adapt the theatrical work to what is considered the necessary realism of the cinema. In fact, the more realistic an opera film is in detail, the more preposterous it seems that the characters should be singing to each other. This is a crucial weakness of Rosi's *Carmen*, which employs real gypsies, soldiers and locations in the hope of providing a convincing backcloth. But the more lifelike the setting, the more contrived the singing appears. Those are real bulls, for example, that Escamillo has to fight in the last act—as dusty, sweaty and enraged as those in Rosi's earlier film about bull-fighting, *The Moment of Truth*—but before he tackles them, he stands stock-still and sings *Si tu m'aimes, Carmen, tu pourras, tout à l'heure, être fière de moi*. Not if he goes about it like that, she won't; the bull would get him first. With the best



The Sight

will, Rosi wrecks the dramatic truth by emphasising the realistic incidentals.

The mistake lies in believing that realism is the cinema's only natural form. This persistent fallacy long hindered appreciation of the Powell-Pressburger films (operatic and non-operatic alike). It was certainly rampant before the war when Abel Gance directed a film of Gustave Charpentier's *Louise*, with the American singer Grace Moore. It is doubtful whether this film would ever have figured high in the Gance canon, but the grounds on which it was attacked in 1938 make instructive reading. According to the anonymous critic in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 'The attempt to transfer opera to the screen in very nearly its original form is interesting in theory, but the task is a heavy one, and it is doubtful whether it is worth expending energy on . . . The libretto is the usual operatic peg for the singing, with the usual operatic artificialities, which the screen enormously magnifies.' Realism, in other words, is fine; artifice, get thee gone. And, sure enough, the reviewer goes on to bleat about the 'unconvincing backcloths', as if Méliès or *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* had never been.

Well, we know better now, but habit dies hard. Faced with an opera film (as opposed to a movie-movie, which can

be as fantastic as all-get-out), modern critics are still apt to look for a realism that is seldom part of the true operatic performance (which has more to do with abstract things, like the harmony of musical notes and phonemes and the expression of credible sentiments rather than credible plots). It is this false trail that may explain why such contemporary examples as the Zeffirelli *Otello* are more warmly welcomed than they deserve.

This *Otello* epitomises most of the pitfalls into which operatic film-makers regularly tumble. It gets off on the wrong foot with a Dolby-enhanced storm scene, with real waves, real winds, real weather, that swamps the music and relegates Verdi to the status of musical accompanist (the Erich Wolfgang Korngold, as it were, of his day). Poor Verdi comes in for some shabby treatment throughout, not just in the excision of the willow song ('boring in the cinema, boring in the theatre, too,' as the director confidently asserts in the face of the many hundreds of millions who have thought differently for the past hundred years), but also in the decision to cap the film with a series of encores over the credit titles at the end. If, by the final fade-out, you don't know the melody for *Un bacio . . . un bacio ancora . . . ah! . . . un altro bacio*, you



The tobacco girls
in Rosi's *Carmen*.

of Music

ALAN STANBROOK

must be tone-deaf because Zeffirelli repeats and repeats it. Verdi, of course, thought once was enough at this juncture. Despite these additions, the score is cut by some thirty minutes for the purposes of the film.

Zeffirelli consistently illustrates what Arrigo Boito's libretto is content merely to state. Otello's childhood, when he was sold into slavery? Yes, here come galloping horsemen sweeping over the sand dunes to carry him off. The love duet, in which Otello and Desdemona recall their courtship? Yes, cue for a flashback. Iago's cock-and-bull yarn about Cassio's romantic dreams? Cue for another flashback, even though what it shows never took place. Logic is abandoned in favour of anything that lends itself to pictorialisation. Hence the inclusion of a party scene to celebrate the Moor's victory over the Muslims that involves injecting into the first act ballet music that Verdi originally wrote for the third act of the Paris production of 1894.

The quest for spectacle, for visual and aural impact, leads the director constantly astray. Too often the music is overlaid with a battery of distracting natural sounds—seagulls crying, clinking swords and the noise of the wind slamming the shutter in the last act that Verdi had already incorporated musically in the score. And, lest anyone should

chide the film for being static, Desdemona takes *Ave Maria* on the move, kneeling at the prie-dieu only for the last phrase. Sad to say, there are no artistic dividends: the film is visually undistinguished and recorded at such a high level that all the singers seem to have voices several sizes larger than life. This is the operatic equivalent of convenience food—pop it in your video and out comes an imitation of the real thing, complete with additives and permitted colourings.

Zeffirelli's disastrous flirtation with opera on film is doubly disappointing because he has a long and distinguished record in the opera house. Many of his productions from the 1950s survive at Covent Garden to this day. But put a camera in his hand and his judgment deserts him. His earlier film of *La Traviata*, with Teresa Stratas and, again, Plácido Domingo, is even dafter than *Otello*. Realism, once more, is its undoing. The second act suffers particularly in this regard. The scenes of Alfredo singing as he rides through the woods, while Violetta gathers wayside flowers and fusses with her love birds in a cage, would be kitsch enough, but there is worse to come. The lovers go boating on the lake, balancing on logs across streams and tumbling in a fit of giggles into the water. Hard, perhaps, to

make a film about silly people without being silly yourself.

The obsession with literal illustration mars Zeffirelli's *Traviata* as much as his *Otello*. Verdi never needs to show us Alfredo's sister, whose happiness is threatened if he continues to associate with the courtesan Violetta. Germont Père tells us all we need to know when he meets Violetta to try to persuade her to give up his son. Zeffirelli, however, uses every reference to her as an excuse for a flashback as if the audience could not otherwise be trusted to get the point. Similarly, in the last act, the off-stage revellers whom Verdi uses as an ironic counterpoint to the wretchedness of Violetta are shown in all their multi-coloured splendour. It enables her to fling wide the window to look-see, letting the cold blast of a Parisian winter roar through her nightgown and play havoc with her hair—as is generally recommended for consumptives. Visually the film is all sentimentality and soft focus, a banquet of marshmallow that never begins to engage with the underlying human drama.

What it does have is prepossessing performers, which the cinema has always regarded as essential if opera is to reach a mass audience. One reason for the current vogue for filmed opera may be that there are at present some tolerably good-looking singers who are no slouches at acting either. In the 1950s, this was not always the case. Hence the fashion then for casting non-singers in the leading roles, with the off-screen voices supplied by opera stars.

At its most absurd, this could mean the 90-minute version of *Aida*, sung by Renata Tebaldi, but with Sophia Loren before the camera as the comely heroine. Canadian-born Lois Maxwell mouthed Amneris to the voice of the great Ebe Stignani on the soundtrack. This 1952 Italian movie is comic-strip Verdi, yet at the same time in Britain, also using non-singers in the key roles, Michael Powell was pointing the way to one of the most fruitful lines of development in filmed opera. A pity he has had so few disciples.

The Tales of Hoffmann, so little regarded as a film in its day that one whole episode was cut before release, makes many bold experiments. It casts ballet stars Moira Shearer, Ludmila Tcherina, Robert Helpmann and Léonide Massine in the principal roles and turns Offenbach's opera into something the composer perhaps scarcely envisaged—a ballet with songs. It is sung in English (the only postwar filmed opera performed in translation until Bergman shot *The Magic Flute* in Swedish). But most important, Hein Heckroth's designs are non-naturalistic, homing in

on the cinema's power to reproduce the landscape of dreams.

A striking use of strong primary colours, expressive camera angles (some clearly influenced by *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*) and clever special effects recreate the fantastic world of E. T. A. Hoffmann, on which Offenbach drew for his opera. Did Werner Herzog, one wonders, when he was filming *Aguirre, Wrath of God*, recall the grim shot from Michael Powell's film of a head rolling across the floor still blinking furiously after separation from the torso?

Each of the three main stories has a dominant colour: yellow for the tale of Olympia, pink for Giulietta, blue for Antonia. Entirely artificial settings—a vast painted staircase, theatrical backdrops, gondolas gliding over make-believe lagoons—are photographed as if only they were true and what we call real life is the stuff of bad dreams. At the same time, the film makes full use of specifically cinematic effects. The seductive *Barcarolle* in the tale of Giulietta is heard behind a superimposed shot of Tcherina's face in the waters of the lagoon. Candle wax is turned magically into gems. A loop shot in the last episode shows Antonia rushing frantically and repeatedly through an exit on the right only to reappear at once through a door on the left. It is one of the most disquieting, nightmarish shots in the film. *The Tales of Hoffmann*, ahead of its time like so many Michael Powell films, succeeds in making a virtue of artifice, grafting the stylisation of opera on to that strain in the cinema that can most happily accommodate it—the one that runs through Méliès and Robert Wiene to James Whale, Val Lewton and others.

But there is artifice and artifice, as Claude Goretta's stage-bound *Orpheus* and Bergman's *Magic Flute* make all too apparent. Bergman's film has few of the cinematically fantastic elements that make Michael Powell's *Hoffmann* so exciting to watch. It is meant to look like a theatrical presentation at Drottningholm, though actually shot in the studio. The accent is on effects that would work on a stage—baskets on pulleys, flutes suspended in air by wires, singalong words and the like. The theatricality of these effects is accentuated by setting them off against a realist framework. The overture is accompanied by shots of an implausibly polyglot audience made up of token blacks, whites, orientals and Indians, presumably to underline the opera's universal appeal. Each act begins with the cast making up backstage, smoking a cigarette, playing chess or boning up on their next parts. The result, however, is to make the audience more aware of what it is not experiencing. This is a *Magic Flute* in which the director asks for no suspension of disbelief. It is meant to look unreal and yet the film delivers none of the raw theatrical power of a straight record of an actual performance. As a surrogate 'night at the opera', there is more fire (and a lot better singing) to be had from a humble video from La Scala or the Met

Right: José van Dam, Kiri Te Kanawa in Losey's *Don Giovanni*.

Far right: Ann Ayars, Robert Helpmann in Powell and Pressburger's *The Tales of Hoffmann*.

Below: Josef Köstlinger in Bergman's *The Magic Flute*.



than from Ingmar Bergman's hybrid.

Whether you enjoy this *Magic Flute* will depend on how you respond to the Bergman slant. Despite the emphasis on the power of love, which Bergman claims is the true subject, some may feel that the main thrust is the incompatibility and desperate marital squabbles of Mr and Mrs Sarastro, only partly relieved by the frank sexuality of Papageno and Papagena. *Smiles of a Summer Night* is not so far away after all, but in Bergman's Mozart adaptation, the spiritual and masonic elements play second fiddle.

There is more confusion of means and distortion of text in another Mozart adaptation—Joseph Losey's version of *Don Giovanni*, which he fashioned, without a by-your-leave, into a prequel to *The Servant*. Da Ponte's libretto has elements of this, notably in Leporello's first aria (*Voglio far il gentiluomo, E non voglio più servir*), but these were not enough for Losey. Two non-singing roles

were invented to underscore the theme—a sinister, baleful manservant not averse to sitting in his master's chair when the Don is out on the tiles and a voluptuous village girl, whose principal function seems to be to serve as a fleshy pillow for his weary head.

Stylistically, Losey's *Don Giovanni* veers every which way. A novel, if somewhat unlikely attempt is made to locate the source of the Don's wealth in a Venetian glass-blowing factory, over which he shows the cast in the opening scene rather like an industrial facility trip. Later, it turns out to be adjacent to the dining-room, since the Don steps back from dinner with the Commendatore straight into the vat.

Losey's inability to make geographical, let alone dramatic sense of the action undermines the effectiveness of many of the arias. Perhaps (because it is so terse) the Don might scamper through the champagne aria on a whistle-stop tour of



Left: Gian-Carlo Menotti's *The Medium*.



Far left: Edith Clever, Robert Lloyd, Michael Kutter in Syberberg's *Parsifal*.

his estate, but Donna Elvira and Don Ottavio clumping distractedly through the grass in full voice stretch belief. Presumably Losey did not want to leave them standing boringly still, but in his film they are not going anywhere. And would the famous catalogue of Don Giovanni's conquests be draped down the steps, across the grounds and half way down the street except that it makes an agreeable shot? Vocally this is an all-star *Don Giovanni* (not just Ruggero Raimondi, but José van Dam, Kiri Te Kanawa, Teresa Berganza and Edda Moser, too), but it is a lot better to listen to than to watch.

Fortunately, Michael Powell's approach to opera has not been a dead end. The Syberberg *Parsifal* eschews realism just as rigorously and succeeds in being most cinematic when it is least true to life. Syberberg has the courage to attempt and, for the most part, to get away with some audacious conceits. In

cold print they often sound battier than they appear in the film. Amfortas' bleeding wound, for example, is carried in on a salver; Parsifal changes sex and number in mid-film, becoming both boy and girl; among the flags and banners in the hall of the Holy Grail are the German eagle and the swastika.

What carries the film is the director's conviction. His is a film of *Parsifal* certainly, but also a film about *Parsifal* and about the role of Wagner in the development of German culture in the twentieth century. Which is why he starts with images of the destruction of German cities during the Second World War. The fake religiosity of *Parsifal*, so close to the ritual of the Holy Communion yet so easy to pervert into Hitlerian racialism, is exposed even as the magic once more works its spell. It is a measure of Syberberg's considerable achievement that one is led to see both the power and the poppycock of *Parsifal*.

To illustrate his theme, everything is grist to the mill. Reproductions of German Romantic paintings (notably Caspar David Friedrich's *The Cross in the Mountain*) are used as backcloths to emphasise a certain strain of religious sentimentality in German culture. Behind the magician Klingsor looms the outline of a watch-tower in a wartime concentration camp. It is a hypnotic picture, whose 4½ hours pass like 45 minutes, highly stylised and—one had almost forgotten to say—of unfailing pictorial grace.

Lastly, and out on a limb, is an almost forgotten picture with some claim to being the most successful filmed opera to date. Musically, Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Medium* is comparatively slight, but dramatically the story of a bogus clairvoyant who proves psychic despite herself makes for a taut, compelling tale, outstandingly well realised in the film that was subsequently made of it. The composer himself is named as director, but his associate was the experienced Alexander Hammid, better known for his work with the American avant-garde film-maker Maya Deren. The film may have been neglected partly because it had no heirs. Neither Menotti nor Hammid worked in the field of filmed opera again. Nobody was to follow their lead.

Its style—all bric-à-brac, chiaroscuro and intricate camera movements around a tiny claustrophobic set—echoes the Cocteau of *Les Parents Terribles*, cross-fertilised, perhaps, with the Kazan of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It looks like many of the best films of its time (1951), with that apparently effortless skill cameramen then had at framing and composition.

A notable feature of the film is the way it confines sung dialogue to the scenes set within the medium's apartment. Outside, where the action ventures into real streets, in which children are playing and plaster is crumbling from the walls, there are only music and children's songs. Menotti and Hammid never risk a collision between operatic stylisation and the real world. Everything sung exists in its own hermetic environment.

Inside the apartment the atmosphere is electric. The scene in which the mute assistant, Toby, dances with the medium's daughter carries a powerful charge of repressed sexuality. And there are shots that stay in the mind long after the rather subfusc score has faded—the medium pursuing Toby round the flat with a whip, dripping candle wax on his eyes to seal them and at last shooting him in panic through a curtain. The three neat bullet holes, through which blood gradually oozes and streams, form an image not easily forgotten. One could imagine other operas filmed this way. *The Makropulos Case*, perhaps, or, indeed, anything by Janáček; Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel*; Penderecki's *Die schwarze Maske*, premiered at Salzburg last summer. It is still not too late to pick up the thread that Menotti left dangling in 1951. ■

BEATING GOD

Salvador

There's a rare moment in Peter Weir's adaptation of *The Mosquito Coast* when the film goes a little beyond its source in Paul Theroux's novel, and even wittily comments on it. Allie Fox, the nouveau Crusoe, evangelist of self-help, practical ecology and a mechanical inventiveness far from the gimcrack substitutes of the modern world, has set out to begin civilisation all over again in Central America. There he confronts the Reverend Spellgood, evangelist of just the kind of religio-materialism (a blue-jeans bible) from which Allie has fled in America. Weir makes their meeting in the Honduran jungle echo back down every dusty main street in American film history: framed from behind, the tools of his trade slung at his hip, Allie advances to meet this trespasser in his paradise: 'State your business, reverend.'

It might be this kind of joke that Theroux had in mind when he recently defended Weir's adaptation in *Time Out*: 'The film made something apparent that was rather vague to me—that Allie and the Rev Spellgood are direct competitors and have a great deal in common. They embody the two noisiest contenders in American life, the inventive preacher and the preachy inventor . . . Each man has a family and a mission and a vision: this is American energy unleashed on a little country far away, about which we know very little. It happens to be Honduras (there were no Marines there when I wrote the book; is this prophetic?); but it might be Vietnam or Liberia, or other places in which we have meddled.' Theroux also singles out a visual effect in the film which he could only half realise in prose: the destruction of Allie's brain child, the ice-making 'Fat Boy', in a nuclear holocaust in miniature (a chilling shot of the family the day after, huddled together in sleep, but looking bleached-out and calcified like the landscape). Bypassing or simply eliding all the industrial steps in-between, Allie's individual enthusiasm, inventiveness and know-how seem inevitably to imply destruction for all.

There are some interesting parallels and continuities—perhaps even the beginning of a trend—between what is happening here and the two new films, arriving in quick succession, with which Oliver Stone has recently dominated American cinema. First, Theroux's comments about where Allie's wanderlust

might have taken him neatly define the area of operations of *Salvador* and *Platoon*: Central America and Vietnam. Secondly, the big bang that is the perverse culmination of Allie's continent-conquering zeal is echoed at the end of *Platoon*, when a spectacular, confused but limited battle on the perimeter of an American company's defences ends in conflagration, a morning-after shot of jungle that seems bled of all life, and a hillside of corpses. Those bodies (North Vietnamese) are shortly seen being bulldozed into a mass grave (which conjures the concentration camps and one historical holocaust), and then are seen from the air, as the hero, Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), who has just won his red badge of courage, is taken out by helicopter and overflies (literally transcends) the grave that now looks like a planet-size crater, dotted with human detritus. As Chris, in silhouette, is swallowed in incandescent light, his voice-over also becomes preachy: 'Those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again, to teach to others what we know . . . to find a goodness and meaning to this life.'

The point is not just the way the horrors of guerrilla warfare, or a mad

idealistic project to rebuild the world, can be collapsed into this ultimate horror, but the solipsism which brings it about, in which there can be mingled guilt and pride—pride that Allie's madness was great enough to destroy the world in token, and that Chris Taylor could either survive Armageddon (he is discovered the morning after the battle a charred but living remnant) or return from the dead (after being wounded in his first fire-fight, he is said to have been 'resurrected') and achieve transcendence. The film of *The Mosquito Coast* actually goes further down this road than the novel, ending, after Allie's death, with his family's re-emergence into the ocean of life, and the eldest son's attainment of his own 'vision'; Theroux just notes that they and the world aren't sucked into Allie's Armageddon. If there are political situations here, genuine guilt and anguish at the death and destruction American 'know-how' can bring, the solipsistic treatment results in religious not political allegories. Salvation is the bottom line. Which in part explains how the situations can happen, if discussion of the political avoids the political; and it explains why Weir's Western joke is such a tempting way of reading the

Salvador: the war correspondents, James Woods and John Savage.



Richard Combs

'TO THE DRAW & Platoon

confrontation in the Honduran jungle, eliding ideologies with gunfighters with preachers.

Honduras may not have been an issue when Theroux wrote *The Mosquito Coast*, but the novel's application is limited by the way it is so locked inside its hero's head (despite being narrated by his eldest son). *Platoon* is an attempt to counter past fictions about Vietnam by telling 'how it was' from the point of view of a US soldier, and is so successfully solipsistic that it excludes the Vietnamese almost entirely. *Salvador*, stylistically, has the greatest political cutting edge, with its opening newsreel footage of civil violence in El Salvador, its rat-a-tat score by Georges Delerue, its fast and furious agitprop-style cutting, and its anger at the US-backed Salvadorean regime and CIA-trained White Hand (death squads). All this is conveyed through the Allie Fox-like figure of photojournalist Richard Boyle (James Woods), or rather Allie-in-reverse, since Boyle, to begin with a sleazy opportunist, does all the right things for all the wrong reasons. This is a dramatically dynamic ploy, though eliding Boyle with El Salvador creates its own distortions and sets up another

solipsistic agenda. When asked in an interview if the title might have been a mistake in selling the film to US audiences, Stone replied: 'Some folk assumed it was a documentary or a purely political film and stayed clear... I did plan to call it *South of the Border* at one point, but *Salvador* to me meant both the country and Salvation.'

Of Stone's two recent films (his third and fourth as director, along with screenwriting credits on *Midnight Express*, De Palma's *Scarface* and *Year of the Dragon*), *Salvador* is the most remarkable, if only for its drive and sense of attack, its willingness to deal in current politics as directly as it does. But it is *Platoon*, and its reception in the US, which has made Stone a phenomenon, and it is interesting to see why. Mingled guilt and pride again seems to have something to do with it—guilt not just over Vietnam but over the way it has been portrayed in the movies, and the way the GIs who fought there have either been passed over or demeaned by false heroics. This would include not just the recent wave of *Rambo* and 'missing in action' movies, which have tried to salvage some pride by refighting the war

and winning it. Films like *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* have also been found guilty, not of inflated heroics but inflated metaphors, a woolly intellectualising which *Platoon* cuts through with honesty and audacity, 'showing how it was back then, over there.'

That line comes from the 26 January issue of *Time* magazine, which puts a kind of official seal on *Platoon*'s testimony to the war by devoting no less than seven pages to it, including an account of how Stone himself volunteered for the army in 1967 and spent fifteen months in Vietnam, how another veteran, Captain Dale Dye, was recruited to the film to put all the cast through rigorous combat training, and with an endorsement from the distinguished political commentator David Halberstam. This suggests where the real cause for pride might lie, in having experienced and survived Vietnam: '*Platoon* is the first real Viet Nam film... A picture like *Rambo* diminished the soldiers who were actually over there; if one Stallone can conquer the enemy, why couldn't *they*? It understands something that the architects of the war never did: how the foliage, the thickness of the jungle, negated US technological superiority. You can see how the forest sucks in American soldiers; they just disappear. I think the film will become an American classic.'

Platoon may be a classic combat movie, if only for its foliage—for the way it makes the jungle palpable, for the way it seems to be trying to obliterate any difference in how these trials by heat, mud and insects are experienced by the audience, the actors and the original soldiers. It strives for such intense atmosphere that, paradoxically, it seems almost non-visual, in the sense that a shot one merely looks at rather than 'feels'—like a reptile climbing the face of a stone buddha at night—seems out of place. At times, the film itself seems to be drowning in its textures, or is prepared to tell its story solely through them, as in the opening shots which baldly 'deliver' Chris and other identically fatigue-clad recruits from the belly of a transport plane into a brownish-yellow haze of dust and noise, followed by an equally abrupt immersion in the silent suffocation of the jungle on their first patrol along the Cambodian border.

Even the portrayal of the war has

Platoon: the messianic sergeant, Willem Dafoe.



more to do with atmosphere than history or narrative—a sequence of events with no sequence, skirmishes and fire-fights that might all be the same bloody, confused encounter, with a cast of characters who in theory are vividly individualised but are somehow indistinguishable, because they are all reduced to the same function, to survive or die. In this way, *Platoon* evokes Vietnam more intensely than any previous film, and at the same time drowns it in all the particularities, infused by boredom, exhaustion, terror, of what it meant to fight there. Because it is so caught up in the common soldier's lot, *Platoon* is also less 'about' the war than any previous film—it has no time for the country or its inhabitants except as they become fragments, symptoms of the psychosis suffered by those GIs who fought there. This is not to say that the film doesn't have an explanation for that sickness, an interior metaphor for what happened to the American psyche that, in much the same way as *The Deer Hunter* or *Apocalypse Now*, bypasses the political for the spiritual and metaphysical.

It is contained in the relationship between two of Chris' platoon sergeants. One, Barnes (Tom Berenger), is the total killing machine, a scarred, demented Frankenstein's monster of war; the other, Elias (Willem Dafoe), has also been rendered somewhat inhuman by long service in the jungle, but in the opposite direction, towards the seraphic, the serene, the Christ-like. Their play-off suggests wider cultural splits that may have been aggravated by the war—between hard-drinking, hard-hat and drop-out, hippy, dope-smoking elements—and contains a degree of sexual tension in their struggle for Chris' soul. But, as rival father figures, they're primarily competing apostles (Elias, arms straddled round a machine gun when first seen, stretched to heaven when last seen, is fetishistically crucified) whom Chris must reconcile on his way to final transcendence. Similarly, one begins to note how even the film's descriptiveness can turn incandescently abstract: Vietnam is either a swamp of thrusting, devouring life or a pattern of light through trees, either jungle primeval or overarching temple.

It is perhaps this split, between 'how it was' reportage and blinding spiritual truth, that has made *Platoon* so appealing, that accounts for its critical elevation while the similar-seeming operations of Cimino and Coppola's films are downgraded. There is something less conspicuously film-like and 'effected' about *Platoon*'s operations, something closer to the model of the Great American Novel, the combination of how-it-was (or how-to-do-it) narrative and spiritual testament exemplified by *Moby Dick* (a comparison the film explicitly conjures by referring to the relentless Barnes as the platoon's Ahab). These are also Oliver Stone's adventures of himself as a young man, another version of the factual tale as spiritual odyssey, a tradition of war reportage exemplified by Hemingway and Mailer. Chris' voice-

over comments give the film a seeming unity as they struggle to express the lessons of the war; at the same time, they make it even more fragmentary, personal, solipsistic, as if the really important endeavour was the young man's gathering of 'experience'.

This is emphasised by Stone's comments about his own service in the war, which so closely match those of his hero as to make the film seem like raw, unmediated autobiography: 'I saw myself as a product—an East Coast socioeconomic product—and I wanted to break out of the mould . . . I felt the solution was total anonymity. I had to atone. So I joined the Army' (Stone). 'I guess I've always been sheltered and special. I just want to be anonymous . . . Maybe from down here I can start up again and be something I can be proud of, without having to fake it, be a fake human being' (Chris). One thing that impelled Stone to break the mould was reading *Lord Jim*, another version of the foreign adventure as moral and spiritual accounting that again suggests why *Platoon* is always looking beyond Vietnam while seeming so immersed in it—as was *Apocalypse Now*, based on *Heart of Darkness*. This also suggests why it is comfortably, humanistically, more than a movie (transcending, say, the conventions of the patrol movie), just as Peter Weir's single genre joke, the Western showdown, emphasises something similar about his *Mosquito Coast*. This, too, has its Conradian design (Allie's houseboat called 'Victory', a detail from Theroux) which one might also see as a pedigree, taking in the majestic human adventures of David Lean, now at work on an adaptation of *Nostromo*.

Perhaps the most revealing passage in David Halberstam's commendation of *Platoon* reads: 'The other Hollywood Viet Nam films have been a rape of history. But *Platoon* is historically and politically accurate.' Given that Stone's film doesn't go into the politics of the war at all, and given that the notion of 'political accuracy' seems a rather odd if not impossible one—as if it could be derived from the historical, or in this case autobiographical, facts—the statement begs some large questions. So, too, does *Salvador*, which likewise achieves political accuracy by focusing on facts, fragments of personal history—in this case the biography of Richard Boyle, the journalist whose unpublished accounts of his forays into El Salvador provided the basis for his and Stone's film script. *Salvador* is honest about, indeed even relishes, the mixture of (mainly rather debased) motives that take Boyle south of the border: need of money, need of an excuse to re-establish his career, need to escape a domestic life in the US which is crashing about his ears, eagerness to rediscover the domestic life (cheap booze and drugs, available women) he has known in El Salvador. At one point, the film was going to reflect its hero's life, times and opinions even more closely by having Boyle, and his equally wasted companion, DJ Dr Rock (impersonated

here by James Belushi), play themselves.

Salvador thus separates itself from the genre of the investigative reporter-hero who has invariably been a nobler if humanly flawed and compromised figure (*The Killing Fields*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Under Fire*), just as surely as *Platoon* separates itself from the patrol movie. Or rather, the energy and passion of the films, the documentary credence they ask for, tries to push the genre conventions into an area where they could be taken as 'politically accurate'. *Platoon*, after all, does share many features of the patrol movie: the unseen but continually pressing enemy; the turning of conflict inward, the way American idealism is split into psychotic and messianic strains (cf Aldrich's *Attack!*); the presentation of officers as either incompetents or opportunists (likewise *The Dirty Dozen* and *Too Late the Hero*). As an extreme patrol movie, *Platoon* stops just short of the approach once advocated by Sam Fuller, in which the camera would simply follow a group of men for the duration of the movie, recreating the exact conditions of a patrol. Richard Boyle might also be a very Fullerian hero, in the way described by Raymond Durnat: 'Fuller's heroes are often the nastiest characters in the movies, and it takes nerve to tune in on this wavelength . . . Fuller's heroes are everybody else's villains.'

At its best, *Salvador* has the ferocity this would suggest, giving real force and menace to the stereotypes of political drama, and doing it in the context of an unprecedentedly committed stand against the Salvadorean regime and its US backers. The vehicle for this is the switching of Boyle's energies from 'playing the angles' to supporting the cause, triggered in the first place by his need to secure a birth certificate and voting papers for local girl Maria (Elepedia Carrillo) in order to get her out of the country. But the switch remains arbitrary, and has to be signalled with an unlikely denunciatory speech by Boyle to the regime's US military advisers. More pertinently, it is the vehicle for Boyle's personal salvation: Maria is Catholic and insists on him attending confession before she will consider marriage. The 'politicisation' of its hero doesn't really give the film much political sense about its characters—it is debatable, for instance, whether it separates itself from or conspires in his attitude towards women—and only weakly suggests what the positive options are for El Salvador itself. The *Time* article on *Platoon* sheepishly acknowledges the existence of *Salvador* (which was not reviewed in the magazine), and refers to it as 'gallivanting political melodrama'. This is a neat elision of the film's political point of view, but one in which the film itself half collaborates. When the article sums up Stone's attitudes and career—'One suspects the old troublemaker will find new trouble spots in the political landscape; the soapbox spieler will continue his spellbinding harangues'—it not surprisingly makes him sound like Allie Fox. ■

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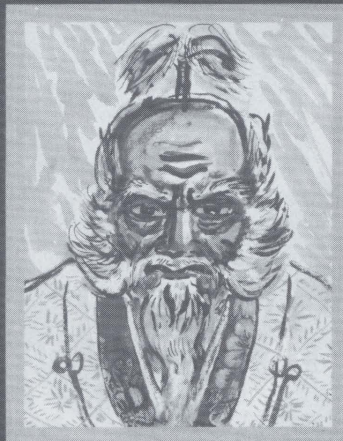
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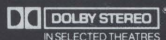
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Come and See.

Partisan

Come and See/Mark Le Fanu

The development over the past decade or so of the Steadicam and the Dolby stereo system has added ever greater refinements to the cinema's traditional ability to draw its audience quasi-physically into the narrative. Stereophonic sound, in particular, has completely altered the experience of the action picture. Now we not only witness the nightmare, we feel its vibration across our bodies—are surrounded by it, incapable of escape.

The advances in cinema technique that have made this possible are difficult to pin down precisely in time. We probably first sensed them in the late 70s with films like *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*. On the evidence of *Come and See* (Cannon), they have recently moved over, seamlessly enough, into Soviet film-making. Elem Klimov, the film's director, utilises the resources of camera and sound and location every bit as intelligently (one should say as modernistically) as the Americans.

This powerful war film, made in 1984, is set in Byelorussia, north of the Ukraine, during the Nazi advance (1941-42). Florya (Alexei Kravchenko), an 11 or 12-year-old boy, joins the partisans in their forest hiding place, but is left behind to look after the camp with the older girl Glasya (Olga Mironova) when the company moves off on a sortie. German bombing drives him and the girl back to his village, which they discover has been looted, and the inhabitants either massacred or dispersed. Making their way to an island in the middle of a marsh, they come across the

weakened survivors. (Florya suffers remorse: his joining the partisans may have caused this particular massacre.)

Out foraging for food, Florya becomes separated from the girl. Episodes and adventures issue eventually in his being caught up in a trawl of the local population. In the village of Perehody the prisoners are herded into a barn which is set on fire. Florya miraculously survives; but at the price, we are made to believe, of a cauterised soul. The German brigade responsible for the outrage is ambushed by the partisans and disposed of—though with more mercy, perhaps, than they themselves had shown the Russians. (The prisoners are shot rather than burned.) The film ends with dazed, disillusioned Florya firing a rifle at an abandoned image of Hitler in the mire.

The movie is terrible and pitiable. Klimov manages, as I say, to convey the authentic relentlessness of nightmare, but in a subtle way which has much to do with the dramatic building up of scenes whose outcome and mood are left open until the very last moment. In the scene, for example, where the boy and girl arrive at the village, you feel at first a sort of happiness and relief. The buildings are still standing (though deserted). Dolls are scattered on the floor, but on the stove there is warm cabbage soup. The girl tastes it, momentarily retches, but then starts eating hungrily. Meanwhile, the boy scouts outside and peers down the well. Returning, he reassures her that he knows where the villagers have fled. Only as the two of them move

away along the path does the camera turn to pick up the sight of a pile of corpses stacked higgledy-piggledy beneath the eaves.

Did Glasya glimpse the sight, or only think she glimpsed it? Death, in wartime, is so ghostly and banal. It brushes you and walks away again. It mocks you by seeming easy to elude. In the scene where the villagers are rounded up, there is an extraordinary sense of casualness and contingency. In the milling throng people are chattering and laughing. Surely the boy could slip away unobserved? But why escape, since there is in any case no certainty about one's fate? The round-up has a momentum of its own. You become part of it for fear of something worse.

When the worst does happen, Florya can look back and see it as inevitable; but it wasn't inevitable then. This is the casual phenomenology of evil which Klimov manages to capture so well. Yet it wouldn't be effective, or moving, unless everything else in the film was also in its own way accurate, idiomatic and imagined. There are great scenes in the partisan camp: one remembers the carcasses of animals laid out for rations. (Also a live animal: 'Eat me before the Germans do.') There is the massive cooking pot which Florya, on fatigues, is forced to scrub out, naked, with birch twigs. And hundreds more details. (Again, the cinema's modern technology is important here: the colour and wide-screen, the phased movement between microscopic close-up and epic distance shot, all combine towards a sense of our 'being there'.)

On top of this, the director has elicited an excellent performance from his central actor Kravchenko. The child, no Tarkovskian wraith (one is thinking of *Ivan's Childhood*), grows old, as it were, before our eyes. Klimov is interested, as always, in exploring the limits of human endurance. What can be lived through, and survived, and how does that change the body physically? A number of scenes—particularly, perhaps, that of the boy and the girl struggling waist-deep across the mudbank to the island—take acting to the very bounds of existential legitimacy. We wonder, as we watch, whether children, no matter how closely supervised, should be asked to go through with such things. (The anxiety is momentary, but makes itself felt.)

Florya's gestures are a marvel of naturalness. One recalls the way he attempts to bury his head in the earth, in remorse, when he comes across the keening villagers; or the casual, sweet way he winks at his sisters, behind their mother's back, before setting out on his partisan adventure; or the desperate unhappiness with which, alone in the field with the dead purloined cow, he attempts to carve out its meat with a penknife. This last image, and the sequence of the evening tracer bullets that precedes it, reminds one again how,

in the best war films, surrealism is not an adjunct to the real, but as it were the very texture of the real itself.

The film's closing sequence is curious, and perhaps might be commented on more fully. After the execution of the German prisoners, the boy is seen wandering round disconsolately. Eventually he fires his rifle at a puddle. At first we think he is shooting at his own remorseful image; but it turns out to be an abandoned portrait of Hitler. Now, with characteristically 'Klimovian' baroque, the present tense image gives way to a newsreel sequence involving the German dictator. The episodes go backwards in time, arriving at a photograph of Hitler as a baby sitting on his mother's knee. An extraordinary and shocking coincidence: he is the very image of the prematurely wizened hero. Perhaps the boy really was shooting at himself. But this interpretation—or meaning—is troubling. On the face of it, we seem to have a common distribution of evil, including both Russian and Nazi. Can one really feel it was Klimov's

intention to say this at this stage in the movie? The tenor of the film is so resolutely partisan, so unforgiving, so implacably anti-Nazi. Everywhere else the film says: the war was the Germans' fault, not the fault of Original Sin.

As we ponder this difficulty, we might ponder one or two other ironies. *Come and See* was put into production at the moment (1983) when the Russians themselves were busy razing villages in Afghanistan, with something of the same ruthlessness that the Nazis are here shown meting out to the Russians. When, in art, does indignation become hypocritical? The question is obviously delicate. The fact that Klimov is indignant here on behalf of the Byelorussians doesn't mean, I suppose, that he isn't indignant, elsewhere, about other intolerable injustices. In Byelorussia, in these war years, there were apparently a hundred thousand executions, 628 villages destroyed. Women and girls were raped wholesale. Such depravities, and the opposition to them, are properly memorialised in cinema. □

towels and robes. Again, however, the camera is reticent. Far more graphic lubricity has become commonplace in heterosexual scenes. Tact, then, is very largely the order of the day; so squeamish viewers need not feel unduly threatened. They, I suspect, will be seeking Alan Bennett in *Prick up Your Ears* (Curzon) rather than Joe Orton. Will they be disappointed? A little. As an Alan Bennett 'character' might well put it, 'What's a nice boy like him doing with a story like that?'

What he's done, essentially, is to broaden it into his own territory by expanding on Orton's family in Leicester (filmed here in Croydon, because most suburbs look alike). Cameo parts go to such practised players as Julie Walters, James Grant and Frances Barber, with Bennett-style lines like 'I never thought such things went on in Leicester.' The result is funny and touching. It explains Orton's apparent coolness at the death of his mother, if not quite the force of his frustration in the family semi. What it fails to do—a huge missed opportunity—is to explore Halliwell's family background in equal depth. The facts are stated: his mother died of a wasp sting when he was eleven, and his father killed himself six years later. But there's little sense of the tragedy, so vivid in two adjoining photographs in John Lahr's book. One shows Halliwell at the age of ten, curly-haired and eager, sitting on the sands in front of his parents (sensitive father, plumply smiling mother). The second was taken at sixteen, the eyes hurt, the mouth disappointed but stubbornly brave.

Halliwell, in fact, is the disappointment of the film. As played, however brilliantly, by Alfred Molina, he simply looks wrong: a six-foot misfit with a Kojak scalp and mournful Kojak eyes. Halliwell, though he went bald, was peppily good looking, a rather brooding

Do we not bleed?

Prick up Your Ears/Richard Mayne

This film is hard to approach without misgivings. The story is grisly, unbearably sad and painfully familiar. Joe Orton, successful playwright, author of *Loot*, *Entertaining Mr Sloane* and *What the Butler Saw*, lives with his homosexual lover Kenneth Halliwell in a tiny Islington flat. They deface library books and are sent to prison. Orton achieves fame; Halliwell feels himself a domestic drudge. They go to Tangier for drugs and boys, a brief respite. They come back to their decorated cage. On 9 August, 1967, Halliwell kills Orton in his sleep, with repeated blows from a hammer; he then takes a fatal overdose of barbiturates. John Lahr, son of Bert Lahr, the Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz*, writes a biography based on Orton's diaries. Last year, these were published. Now we have Stephen Frears' film, based on Alan Bennett's script. Is there no end to the Orton wake?

The film's opening at least calms some elementary fears. No blood pods explode on a sleeping skull, no glistening gore is dwelt on. Anxious knocks at the door—discreet hints—a glimpse of the diaries: just enough emerges to cast shadows over the flashback past. It seems a pity that this restraint evaporates at the film's ending. Then, butchery is made plain.

Further restraint marks the treatment of Orton's promiscuity. Lurking darkly near public lavatories, he accosts various youths in leather jackets, and at least one bank-manager type. The men in blue appear or are suspected; the delinquents lie or scatter: these are the bad

old days, when so much was illegal—though for Orton it seems to have been a game. So far, so sordid: but, language apart, nothing very shocking comes our way. What remains is a sense of betrayal, which is how it must have seemed to Halliwell, for whom there were bigger betrayals in store.

Tangier is a further possible occasion for audience distaste. Debauching Moroccan boys, however willing, is not everyone's idea of foreign holiday fun; and there's a school dormitory flavour to some of the skirmishing in white



Prick up Your Ears: Gary Oldman as Joe Orton.

macho figure, if surviving photographs tell the truth. Molina's appearance may well portray his inner reality; but it's hard to see what attracted Orton.

The pity of that is all the greater because Orton, in the film, is utterly convincing. Gary Oldman, fresh from playing Sid Vicious, not only shares Orton's perky good looks: he has the same sparrow's quickness, alert to his audience, gauging the effect of his charm. One can believe how much he impressed the agent Peggy Ramsay, played here with masterly firmness by Vanessa Redgrave. One can see why his sexual partners sought him. One can even sense why, despite everything, he remained the object of Halliwell's love.

'Everything' included taking the credit for Halliwell's ideas, failing to include him in invitations, and leaving him alone with his growing awareness of

failure. A more compassionate person might have behaved differently. 'If you prick us, do we not bleed?' On the evidence of the book, the diaries and the film, Orton might have smiled at the quotation, but missed its point.

Whether, in longer perspective, his work will rescue him from Halliwell's revenge, which turned him into a *faits-divers* victim, remains a moot point. The film hardly shows the evidence. Some have compared Orton with Oscar Wilde; but although he figures in dictionaries of quotations, his epigrams seem weak. The strength of his plays is their high-spirited naughtiness, a Cheeky Chappie's irreverence, Max Miller turned cruel and camp. Bennett and Frears, between them, have coaxed from Gary Oldman a performance which stunningly walks that tightrope between our fascination and our mistrust. □

man's chest... We're in the land of the dead, the noir nightworld of downtown New Orleans inhabited by Jack and Zack, both of them laid back to the point of catatonia.

'You're digging your own grave,' Zack's girlfriend Laurette tells him, pausing in her task of throwing all his possessions into the street below, to which a graffito on the wall adds: 'It's not the fall that kills you, it's the sudden stop.' Zack's in free-fall inertia, and the stop's about to hit him. Jack meanwhile slumps lifelessly in a chair, submitting to the sardonic jibes of his black hooker ('You don't understand any kind of people, you sure don't understand women, and a pimp is supposed to understand women'), only rousing himself to walk blindly into an elementary trap. Shacked up in the same cell, the two men retreat into sterile nihilism: 'As far as I'm concerned, you don't exist.' 'Walls don't exist, prison doesn't exist. Nothing's really here at all.'

'Down by law' sounds as though it should mean 'sent to jail', but is in fact street slang for 'in control'. Which is just what Roberto is, for all that he comes across as a naive buffoon. Whatever Roberto wants, he gets—in the nicest possible way. He wants Jack and Zack to talk (both for company and to provide fodder for his notebook), and despite themselves they do. He wants them all to escape, and so they do. He wants to head for the Texas border (having seen Texas in the movies), and that's where they end up. Like his favourite poet Walt Whitman, whom he quotes in Italian, Roberto is a force of unstoppable affirmation; against him, the near-zombified American pair never stand a chance.

Roberto's role presents a neat reversal of all those stories, from Mark Twain onwards, in which an ingenuous transatlantic visitor disrupts sluggish, enervated old Europe. Like Cousin Eva in

Swamp water

Down by Law/Philip Kemp

It's a very dumb little story... It's not supposed to be full of heavy-handed deep meanings and subtexts. Take Jim Jarmusch's disclaimer at face value, and *Down by Law* (Palace) emerges as a victory of form over content, a coolly mannered *jeu d'esprit* graced by Robby Müller's elegant monochrome camerawork. Even at that level, there's a good deal of incidental pleasure to be gleaned. Still, 'choking the alligator', as John Lurie advised his immigrant cousin in Jarmusch's previous film *Stranger Than Paradise*, is a better phrase than 'using the vacuum cleaner', and there may be an alligator or two to be choked beneath the surface of *Down by Law*'s torpid bayous.

This time around, the saurian Lurie plays Jack, a New Orleans pimp set up by a vengeful rival and slung in jail, where he winds up sharing a cell with Zack, a drunken DJ likewise framed, and played by the singer Tom Waits. Into the taciturn hostility of their co-existence erupts Roberto (Italian comedian Roberto Benigni), an irrepressible optimist toting a notebook full of fractured English idiom. ('I yam a good hegg.') Reluctantly, they find themselves drawn by the Italian into grudging communication, and then into an escape plan which brings them out of jail and through the Louisiana swamplands to Luigi's Tintop, an isolated eating-house near the Texas border run by Nicoletta, niece of the late Luigi. Roberto and Nicoletta promptly fall in love, leaving Jack and Zack to pursue their solitary and divergent ways.

A dumb little story? Well, maybe. But then so, in outline, are most fairytales, into whose classic Grimmian mould *Down by Law* can plausibly be fitted. The two elder brothers, surly and ill-

mannered, are requited for their churlishness by succumbing to evil powers which consign them to incarceration. But the open-hearted third son, despised by his elders as an idiot, is magically enabled to escape, taking his brothers with him, and to lead them safely through the wilderness to freedom. What's more, he gets to marry the princess and inherit her kingdom.

If this seems over-reductive, consider some of the images, visual and verbal, that the film throws up. We open on a long, low hearse parked outside a cemetery, from which the camera takes off in a fast lateral glide past rows of box-like houses with elaborate porticos, like family mausolea, while Waits sings on the soundtrack, 'Sixteen men on a dead

Down by Law: John Lurie, Tom Waits and Roberto Benigni.



Stranger Than Paradise—or like the fugitive alien in John Sayles' *Brother from Another Planet*—Roberto's distance from the social assumptions that surround him bestows a freedom not only from complicity, but from constraint. It's a fairly unmodish, even Capraesque, view of innocence—a quality more likely these days to be treated as blunderingly obtuse, or just plain vulnerable—and suggests (as does the parallel with Sayles) that, beneath Jarmusch's sophisticated cool, there may be an old-fashioned romantic struggling to surface.

Hence, perhaps, the slightly unsatisfactory nature of the whole enterprise. Where *Stranger Than Paradise*, with its detached stance, unpredictable structure and deadpan narrative elisions, worked perfectly within its own downbeat terms, *Down by Law* seems on occasion to be soliciting our approval—something the earlier film never did for a moment. This uncertainty of tone is most marked in the breakfast scene where Roberto and Nicoletta dance together, with loving ungainliness, to a jukebox record of 'It's Raining'; Jarmusch, one senses, is

aiming here for a lyrical epiphany that's just a touch too willed to be affecting.

Not that such lapses detract from the relishable moments, of which there are plenty—the slow, jaw-dropping reaction of the two lowlifes (both innocent as charged) to Roberto's blithe admission that he killed a man; the prison riot sparked off by a chant of 'I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice-cream'; the Italian's anxious monologue as he squats alone in the bayou reliving childhood fears of being felled by a maternal rabbit-punch: 'I am not rabbit! My mother very strange mother . . .' But taken as a whole, *Down by Law* recalls similar misgivings aroused by Susan Seidelman's *Desperately Seeking Susan* (again, a thoroughly enjoyable film in itself) after her earlier, rougher *Smithereens*—that a gain in technical assurance seems to have entailed concessions towards a more conventional narrative pattern. All too many quirky and individual talents have been subsumed into the bland cinematic mainstream; a shame, should a director of Jarmusch's freshness of vision go the same way. □

Eye on L.A.

The Morning After/Richard Combs

It's not long before *The Morning After* (Fox), a murder mystery with romantic comedy overtones, is hinting where the bodies—apart from the one discovered in a maliciously chilling opening sequence—might lie. There's an overhead shot of the heroine, actress Alex Sternbergen (Jane Fonda), throwing up in a toilet after waking in a bed soaked with someone else's blood; there's her subsequent attempt to flee town, driven by furies sardonic and perhaps Catholic enough to take her back where she started; then there's her return to the scene of the crime (perhaps hers, since the lady suffers from blackouts brought on not by vertigo but by booze) and her fastidious cleaning-up of the evidence; and there's the body's tendency after that not to stay put, at one point popping out of Alex's own shower.

It's easy to see where this Hitchcock pastiche doesn't really work, mainly in the attempt to lend any darkness to the bantering relationship Alex strikes up with ex-cop Turner Kendall (Jeff Bridges). He rescues her from an imbroglio at the airport, and then extends his current trade as mechanic and repairman to helping her put her life back together, the implication being that as cripples (he by the wound that impaired his weapon handling, she by the bottle), now leading somewhat makeshift lives, they are made for each other anyway. But the suggestion that he might be involved in the plot to set her up for murder is obviously a non-

starter, and the film rather strenuously throws its weight behind some lighting and music effects to compensate. But what is pertinently Hitchcockian—and it's something that doesn't find its way into all the showerbath scenes and murderous gazing of the De Palma imitations—is a pattern of social comedy in Alex and Turner's relationship, which the film then extends into an ironic visual pattern.

They rehearse little hostilities and rivalries of class and background (Turner is from Bakersfield, Alex, as he puts it, is 'L.A. by way of the Big Apple'); she assumes defensive airs about her raised consciousness (pretending to be offended by his assumed bigotry) and her stalled career. This brittleness and archness, in fact, all the play on showing and acting, keys the visual pattern, a sardonic abstraction, a reflection of these reflections of life. The sardonic tone is evidently Sidney Lumet's, the response of a director who has always resisted Hollywood and insisted on shooting where 'life' is, in New York, to finally making a genre thriller in Los Angeles. His response has been to turn his setting into an Edward Hopper painting, emphasising empty streets and incongruous, wistful slabs of colour. Lonely, horizontal compositions also honour the painter in defiance of the film's own standard frame. Lumet, who has already sounded a Hopper note in *Prince of the City*, that epic of apparently unselfconscious realism, and abstractly



The Morning After: Jane Fonda.

mingled Boston and New York locations for the purposes of religious parable in *The Verdict*, gives *The Morning After* a witty relevance to its setting in a city of images. The film's first shot takes in a television programme, *Eye on L.A.*, on which a photographer is being quizzed about whether his pictures of women body-builders are a new kind of pornography, before panning over to the bed where Alex is discovered next to that same, now messily dead, photographer.

The pattern is even extended into something like another parable, via a few more details of archetypal Americana. Making up a triangle with displaced natives Turner and Alex is aspiring immigrant Joaquin Manero, 'Jacky' (Raul Julia), Alex's husband for the past ten years—from whom she has been separated for almost as long, though he continues to function as her friend, agent, hairdresser and obscure mover behind the scenes. When Turner displays further evidence of his bumpkinish ignorance by not recognising Jacky's name, and then expresses surprise that a hairdresser should be a 'name', Alex retorts, 'That's what he does, it's not what he is . . . he's smart, he knows the people in charge.' But Jacky wants to move closer to those centres of power, as Alex realises when she learns that he is finalising their separation with a divorce, which will leave him free to marry a judge's daughter ('You've been on the outside long enough, now you want in . . . all that breeding, all that

early American stuff'). The fact that these events take place on or around Thanksgiving Day hones the parable, making this, in its small way, as epic an overview not just of L.A. as Hal Ashby's rattle of an ambitious hairdresser, *Shampoo*.

It is Jacky's ambitiousness, of course, that proves to be behind the attempt to frame Alex for murder. This comes as no great surprise as a plot point, and is followed by a subdued whimper of a social theme: having done what he did to protect his new family connections, Jacky will be sacrificed to protect their name. This sounds like the kind of theme Lumet might once have propounded with more earnestness; here it just seems like an afterthought, and neither the theme nor the plot really proves strong enough to sustain the last half of the film. *The Morning After* is, for a romantic thriller, perhaps overburdened with possible patterns (as pastiche, parable and painting) and is hardly able to incorporate an element of strained jokiness ('I'll just tidy up, and you keep on doing whatever you were doing,' says Alex to the corpse, pulling the knife from his chest with a soft plop). It works best, however, when, like the Master, it is able to observe most through a deceptively glazed eye. □

'Shazam!'

Always/Tom Milne

'I don't know how to explain it, exactly, I was so happy,' Henry Jaglom confides to camera at the beginning of *Always* (Mainline), describing the break-up after seven years of his marriage to actress Patrice Townsend. 'Then one day she came home from yoga class...' And obligingly, a troubled Townsend appears in the doorway—a portal, as it transpires, to the secret places of memory and illusion—to explain without explanation that she cannot live with him any more.

Now, two years of pain and misery after the separation, Jaglom is expecting a visit from his wife to sign the final divorce papers in the presence of a notary; and since he is a film-maker, he has decided to make a film about the reunion, for which he has, as a surprise which enshrines the supplicatory quality of a burnt offering, for the first time ever cooked her a meal. The credits start to unfold; over them, Fred Astaire singing Jerome Kern's 'Dearly Beloved'; behind them, actual home movie footage in colour of their wedding. The doorbell rings. It is Patrice Townsend. 'Hi, baby,' he murmurs, and as the awkwardly pregnant encounter seems about to suspend itself in time, he defuses it by begging a kiss ('Just a superficial one') which threatens to open up the wounds again ('I want more,' he complains).



Always: Patrice Townsend, Henry Jaglom.

There can't be many precedents in cinema for a film in which a couple re-enact their painful marital history for the camera; and the unique sense of emotional intimacy is immediately apparent as she watches in tolerant amusement while he fusses around in the kitchen, as he bristles with an instinctively proprietary 'Who with?' when she pleads a prior engagement, as she absently nibbles the nuts he picks out of a chocolate cookie he is eating and feeds to her as he always used to. A marriage, surviving in the shared trivia of memory and the ineradicable force of habit, is suddenly conjured before our eyes so vividly that the little joke about the plumply benign notary, who declares himself too touched by their rediscovery of the selves who loved each other to be willing to finalise the divorce without giving them the weekend to think it over, itself becomes more than a little touching in view of the evidence we share with him.

But it is, of course, a joke. Or more accurately, a fake (in the sense Welles seeks to define in *F for Fake* when he quotes Picasso's dictum that 'Art is a lie, a lie that makes us realise the truth'), in that we know—and Jaglom knows we know—it can't have happened like this. Jaglom stresses the point at the end of the film when, announcing that after all he is making this movie, he instructs his wife/actress to reappear in the magic portal and prompts her delivery of the lines that will conjure a happy ending: 'I'm sorry, I was wrong. Everything's going to be fine.' Actually, the dismantling process starts almost at the beginning when the 'divorce dinner' cooked by Jaglom, and pronounced delicious by Townsend, ironically provides the answer to his prayer that she remain under his roof when she is forced to retire to bed with a mild bout of food poisoning.

Quickly gathering momentum, the irony escalates into grotesquerie as the

house sheltering the couple over Thanksgiving weekend is invaded first by their best friends (a married couple on the brink of a fatal quarrel), then by Townsend's younger sister and her mously sharp-witted boyfriend (latest in a long line of dubious conquests), and finally by a horde of guests, neighbours and gatecrashers all milling round a barbecue party which threatens to turn into a Götterdämmerung of marital or affianced betrayals. As the action proceeds, in fact, it isn't hard to see that it has nothing to do with exploring the reasons for the break-up of the Jaglom-Townsend marriage or the grounds for its possible repair, everything—especially since the two major infidelities thrown up by the party lead directly to a reaffirmation of marital or betrothal ties—to do with Jaglom's own state of mind as he feverishly juggles jealousies and a bitter sense of betrayal against the sustaining illusion that everything's going to be fine again.

For the still centre of the film is Jaglom himself, secure in his own home (where the film was shot) and surrounded by the household *penates* familiar from his earlier movies: the Tom & Jerry cartoon posters, the jukebox pouring out a stream of amorous complaints, the crazy recipes for happiness. Here, he recalls the comic book character of Hoppy the Marvel Rabbit who, on uttering the magic formula, could become a superhero able to take care of people, not forgetting his girl bunny. 'Shazam!' he says, hopefully clutching his wife by the hand. But nothing happens, and like the shots of the deserted garden by night that punctuate the film with a Japanese lantern standing in for the moon, romance remains a dream. *Always* may be a lie, but as the 'his' of divorce following on the 'hers' of *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?*, it is a lie that manages the not inconsiderable feat of making us realise the truth of one man's pain. □

Conservatory blues

Golden Eighties/Jill Forbes

Shopping precincts are as good an indication as any of our moral condition. Just as the Passage Choiseul, where in the early years of the century Céline's anti-hero watched his parents sinking deeper and deeper with every passing moment, identified the wellsprings of petit-bourgeois resentment, so now in the 1980s, from Las Vegas to Les Halles, the tinted marbles, the hothouse plants and the fountains create an environment that literally encapsulates the hedonism of a life lived permanently in a conservatory. These people are sheltered from the elements, maintained at the perfect temperature, insulated from the inconveniences of the outside world but with all the advantages and semblances of it (shops, cafés, cinemas, passers-by...). The shopping mall, today, is the nexus of postmodernism and consumerism.

To judge from its title *Golden Eighties* (Electric), Chantal Akerman's latest film is an explicit comment on the malaise of our civilisation, a sidelong and witty look at our aspirations and moral values. After the years of lead come the years of gold-dust! These neatly shod female feet which populate the title sequence, briskly criss-crossing the strawberry-coloured slabs of stone, bent on crucial and important missions, these are the locomotive of the economy.

But *Golden Eighties* has another economy too. It was Jacques Demy who first realised that the enclosed space of a gallery and its symmetrical design is the perfect foil for a musical, with the constraints of the setting justifying and shaping the choreography of the formation dancing and making the musical romanticism seem more fantastic in contrast. This is Akerman's tribute to Demy, although it does not have the desperation that certainly underlay his last film *Une Chambre en Ville*. *Golden Eighties* is joky and fast-moving, with one of the liveliest scores, by Marc Herouet, and wittiest sets of lyrics, by Akerman, but, alas, not well subtitled, for many years.

But where is the happiness in these golden eighties? This is the sad tale of Mado the hairdresser's apprentice who loves Robert, son of the owners of the clothes shop opposite, although Robert only wants Lili, Mado's sexy, flirtatious and untrustworthy boss who is Monsieur Jean's mistress. So Robert should make a sacrifice and settle down to a life of effort and responsibility, just as his father Monsieur Schwartz had settled down with Jeanne. But at what cost? For Jeanne had loved an American GI called Eli who now, remarkably, comes strolling through the mall, recognises her after all these years and tries to persuade her to come away with him. This is a goldfish bowl in which every move

the principals make is observed and maliciously commented on by the chorus of male layabouts and shampoo girls. A continuous, edifying spectacle that almost everyone dreams of leaving.

The point is, however, they construct their dreams the better to remain where they are. Rather like Marie-France Pisier in *Souvenirs d'en France*, Lili, terminally bored with Monsieur Jean's attentions, takes off with the Eli whom Jeanne has just rejected, only to return two months later, ludicrously and heavily disguised in headscarf and dark glasses, just in time to seduce Robert and so sabotage his wedding. Sylvie, the girl who runs the bar, is thrilled with an escape that keeps her rooted to the spot, in the form of letters from her boyfriend who has gone to Canada to make his fortune. 'He hates it there,' she says. 'So he's coming back?' they all ask. 'Not yet,' replies Sylvie with an angelic smile, and her world would clearly be shattered if he did. All the other characters construct scenarios as unreal as the mall itself, all except Lili are incurable romantics.

Yet even their romantic yearnings ring repetitiously. Monsieur Schwartz's disquisition on the work ethic parrots the pages of *L'Expansion*, but bears absolutely no relation to reality or the people around him; Lili's sentiments in regard to Monsieur Jean are radically inauthentic; both are typical of the world of the shopping mall: everyone is recycling snatches of sentiment and belief that they have taken off the peg in order

to help them stay exactly where they are. Exogamy, it would seem, is virtually impossible, as is thought beyond this infernally constructed spiral.

It is the Schwartz couple who are the absent centre of *Golden Eighties*. Delphine Seyrig as the gracefully ageing Jeanne, whose radiant smile is half designed to sell clothes and half the result of her detachment, perfectly incarnates the mentality of caution and prudence, while Charles Denner as Schwartz, in his over-neat suit, his concern for *Lebensraum*, his designs on the floor space of Lili's salon, has learned the lessons of modern commerce so well that he embodies its stresses, his grandiose ambitions contrasting markedly with his slightly pinched appearance and slightly nervous demeanour. Neither is capable of articulating clearly what they want. When Schwartz wants to talk he goes into the mall and paces up and down; when Jeanne wants to talk she goes into the cinema and unburdens her heart in front of a screen playing old, romantic movies. Indeed, when any of the couples in *Golden Eighties* meet it has to be in a cubicle for they have no space outside the mall itself.

Golden Eighties does not bear thinking about too closely, and indeed does not require it. The film is as frothy as the shampoo in the hairdresser's, a film in a much more popular and accessible mode than some of Akerman's earlier works, and a film which contrives to be witty and tender and sad, despite its devastatingly accurate observation of the way we live now. And if the musical genre is one which many audiences traditionally find difficult, this film should go a long way towards effecting a reconciliation. □

Golden Eighties: Fanny Cottençon.



Ford Rambler

JOHN FORD
The Man and His Films
 by Tag Gallagher

University of California
 Press/\$35

'I shall almost always be wrong, when I conceive of a man's character as being all of one piece.' Appearing at the outset of Tag Gallagher's massive critical biography of Ford, this quotation from Stendhal serves both as apologia and as fair warning to readers hoping to find a unified portrait of its subject. Written over the past two decades, Gallagher's exasperating yet invaluable compendium of diverse thoughts and data may lack the coherence of previous Ford studies by Anderson, McBride/Wilmington, Place and Sinclair (among others). Yet in its out-sized efforts to do justice to the contradictions and complexities of the man and his work, it still offers a range of information and insight that dwarfs all competitors.

For one thing, Gallagher certainly goes beyond his predecessors in contriving to grapple with all the surviving films, most of which he arranges in four periods: The Age of Introspection (1927-35), Age of Idealism (1935-47), Age of Myth (1948-61) and Age of Mortality (1962-65). Believing Ford's best films (*Pilgrimage*, *Judge Priest*, *Stagecoach*, *Young Mr Lincoln*, *How Green Was My Valley*, *Wagon Master*, *The Quiet Man*, *The Sun Shines Bright*, *Mogambo*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *The Civil War*, *Donovan's Reef* and *7 Women*) to lie in all four periods, Gallagher is able to tease out a surprising number of threads that recur throughout the oeuvre. A glance at his index reveals more than sixty themes and motifs that are traced through countless films: absent family members, Boston, brawls, dances, doctors, flowers, fools, graves, Indians, lanterns, lawyers, parades, prostitutes, rivers and weddings comprise only a sampling. (Boston, we learn, has basically negative connotations for Ford in *My Darling Clementine*, *Fort Apache*, *The Last Hurrah*, *Donovan's Reef* and *7 Women*, characteristically signifying chaos and screwballs. Dances are traced through 29 films, flowers through 24, graves through 21, lanterns through a dozen.)

More persuasive about Ford's mythology than about his shifting and ambivalent politics (which seem to have run the gamut from left to right as fully as Mizoguchi's), Gallagher devotes a great deal of attention to

both. The sense of Ford's personality which emerges achieves at times a novelistic density. And the films are often seen to reverberate on multiple planes as well: a simple arm gesture made by John Wayne in the last shot of *The Searchers* is traced all the way back to a signal gesture made by Harry Carey in several early Ford Westerns—an echo given further resonance by the fact that the house Wayne is leaving is that of Mrs Jorgensen, played by Carey's widow.

All the same, *John Ford* often presents something of an obstacle course. Like the crotchety Ford he describes, Gallagher himself is a creature of mixed purposes and motives, and in addition to hagiography, gossip, criticism and biography, the book provides Ford's earnings, the negative costs and domestic grosses on most of his features, the salaries of all the lead actors in *Fort Apache*, countless production anecdotes and stray details. Much of this information is useful to have, but Gallagher often has trouble distinguishing the pertinent from the incidental, and his scattershot style adds to an overall sense of kitchen sink clutter.

While the book bears witness to the critical debates that have circulated round Ford in relation to Catholicism, history, militarism, patriotism, racism and sexism, it is chiefly grounded in the romantic, transcendental auteurism of the 60s rather than the New Left scepticism about these positions which developed somewhat later. Gallagher devotes considerable space, however, to responding to this scepticism, and comes closer than any other Anglo-American critic to defending Jean-Marie Straub's description of Ford as Brechtian and dialectical—with films as diverse as *Air Mail*, *Fort Apache*, *The Quiet Man* and *Donovan's Reef* offered among the key exhibits. As with the Brechtian Sirk constructed by some British critics in the early 70s, Gallagher's arguments are not likely to sway viewers more concerned with the popular responses to these films when they first appeared. But there are intriguing suggestions along the way: *The Quiet Man* as a sociological analysis of Innisfree society; *Donovan's Reef* as Ford's equivalent to *The Golden Coach*.

Some readers are bound to quarrel with some of the author's priorities. *Mogambo* gets almost a dozen pages of close analysis, while *Tobacco Road* is dismissed in three sentences, and Gallagher is mainly disrespectful of 'established' classics such as *The Informer*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Long Voyage Home* and the last two-thirds of the Cavalry trilogy. Sometimes these putdowns seem

perfunctory rather than reasoned ('Those who delight chiefly in the spoken word' relish *The Long Voyage Home*, Gallagher notes sniffily, ignoring that it arguably contains Gregg Toland's best work outside *Citizen Kane*), and on the whole the book is stronger when the author is sufficiently engaged with a film to describe it in some detail. A generous array of frame enlargements accompany most of the extended analyses. When the prose gets overblown or ungainly, there is usually an attractive or revealing illustration nearby to put things back in perspective.

JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

Left march

DEADLY PARALLELS
Film and the Left in Britain
 1929-39

by Bert Hogenkamp

Lawrence and Wishart/£6.95

As I write, the Special Branch has just raided the offices of the BBC and seized a van-load of material from a projected television series on our secret society. All shades of oppositional opinion turn puce (or rose-red) in protest, as we the people see it on our tv screens, watching ourselves being watched. In these times we see what is done in our name.

Fifty years ago, it was very different. News, information, opinion from an oppositional (left) perspective was for most people hard to come by, not least in the then dominant visual medium of the cinema. The news-reel companies saw news as a given, not as a construction propagating a particular point of view; commercial cinema was 'film dope'. Until fairly recently it might have been supposed that the only alternative voice of British cinema in the 1930s was that of the documentary movement (in any case rather less alternative than it thought itself). But within the last ten years or so, and thanks to the retrieval work of a number of film historians, we have discovered that the 30s in Britain witnessed an active, if fraught and fragmented, 'independent' cinema practice: the making, distribution and exhibition of films which have come to be grouped under the general title of the Workers' Film Movement. One of the pioneers of this recovery of British cinema history is a Dutchman, Bert Hogenkamp, some of whose work in this area has already appeared in this journal. Hogenkamp has now shaped his extensive research into a book; and valuable it is.

Deadly Parallels (the title comes from an illustrated monthly of 1907) is a history, more or less chronological, of the use made of film by the various left movements of the 30s. As Hogenkamp readily admits, his book avoids confronting the theoretical problems of the British left in the 30s, making virtually no connection for instance with the prodigious Marxist literary output of the time. His rationale is that such an approach 'seemed completely out of place when dealing with a movement which produced virtually no theory, which excelled in its pragmatism, especially compared with similar movements abroad.' This is open to question—and will be questioned. Meanwhile, Hogenkamp's book provides as thorough a history of independent cinema in the 30s as we are likely to get.

Until the 30s, and despite a clarion call for 'Socialism on the Screen' as early as 1892, there had been very little film activity on the left. Hogenkamp has unearthed the intriguing 'Whiffly Puncto', a magic lanternist whose slide shows contrasted 'the reeking slums and the princely palaces' in an early form of juxtapositional montage. But many years passed before the Labour Party itself began actively to discuss plans for making films, and nothing in the end ever came of it. A spur to socialism on the screen eventually came with the 'class against class' Comintern policy of 1928, which decreed a new form of proletarian culture.

In Britain, a year later, the Federation of Workers' Film Societies was formed, and the long struggle began to show Soviet films banned by the British Board of Film Censors and most local authorities. Showing Soviet films remained a key factor in left film practice (as the Conservative Central Office appreciated, with its retaliatory report on 'Soviet Film Propaganda' and its own fleet of film vans), at least until the Nazi-Soviet pact. But it was equally important to make films, and to get them widely distributed. The Workers' Topical News newsreels showed hunger marches and demonstrations against unemployment (the commercial news-reel companies had been asked by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner not to film the hunger marches of 1932 and 1934). Their editor, Ralph Bond, urged more production: 'We must learn to master . . . the elements of film production so that when we have the resources after the revolution we shall know how to make use of them.'

After the revolution . . . It was of course the Communist Party which led the way in workers'

cinema. The critic Huntly Carter called for a British Labour Five Years' Cinema Plan: it was a shout in the dark. The films made by the Socialist Film Council were savaged by Paul Rotha ('It reminds me of what was once called the fashionable habit of slumming'); one of them, with Naomi Mitchison as a working-class mother on the bread line, even Grierson found 'queer from an ideological point of view.' Hogenkamp reports rather than makes such judgments. The organisations which loom large in his book—notably Kino and the Workers' Film and Photo League—do so not because they were the most ideologically 'correct' (internal, and interminable, debate was a feature then as now), but simply because they were the most active.

The Workers' Film and Photo League (whose secretary, Jean Ross, was the prickly 'Peter Porcupine', film critic of the *Daily Worker* and the model for Isherwood's Sally Bowles) eventually dropped the first word of its title and evolved as a non-party organisation with interests also in film education. Kino continued on its dual course as a distribution agency and a production group, responsible for such films as *Bread* (1934) and the first *Workers' Newsreels*. Kino's disappointing production record does not escape Hogenkamp's strictures. Significantly, it was not Kino but Ivor Montagu (indefatigable gadfly of left cinema and founder of the Progressive Film Institute) who with Norman McLaren rushed to Spain at the end of 1936 and brought back the footage which was incorporated into *Defence of Madrid*. Hogenkamp regards Montagu's 1939 *Peace and Plenty*, with its Chamberlain mannequin (made by Elsa Lanchester's mother) and its break with the realist conventions which dominated left film-making, as an exceptional film. Even Tory MPs were impressed; safely, because the war soon brought the end of oppositional cinema—and the beginning of a thirty-year sleep.

A short review does scant justice to the wealth of material which Hogenkamp has assembled, particularly in the area of rank and file film activity. Indeed, if the book has a fault (apart from its appalling proof-reading), it is that the sheer volume of detail tends to overcloud the general view. On occasion, one would have welcomed the marshalling of the facts into a clearer historical and political context. But in the end the book's value is precisely its range of detail: it is important that such history be retrieved. For how things have changed. Haven't they?

DAVID WILSON

The lower depths

**PRODUCERS
RELEASING
CORPORATION
A Comprehensive
Filmography and History**
edited by Wheeler Dixon
McFarland & Company/£19.95

By their works ye shall know them. As the studio system recedes into history, each of the Hollywood majors has received its obit volume—*The MGM Years*, *Warner Brothers Presents*, *The Films of 20th Century-Fox*, and so on—lavish widescreen tomes stuffed with stars and glossy with Technicolor. PRC, the 40s poverty-row studio that made Republic Pictures look profligate, gets a scrawny (166pp) monochrome production, eked out with borrowings from elsewhere and some fairly desperate padding. Only the binding (sturdy) and the price (steep) lift it out of the B-movie bracket.

Producers Releasing Corporation emerged around 1940 out of a grab-bag of small, rickety companies cobbled together by the producer Sigmund Neufeld with backing from Pathé. It survived until 1947, when it was absorbed into Eagle-Lion. J. Arthur Rank's ill-fated attempt to acquire some US distribution muscle. During those seven years PRC turned out upwards of 250 features, most of them virtually devoid of production values, but of which a handful strikingly transcended—or perhaps transmuted—their limitations.

'At the beginning of the season, Fromkess would sit down with me and Neufeld, and we would invent forty-eight titles. We didn't have stories yet; they had to be written to fit the cockeyed titles.' Such, according to PRC's star director, Edgar G. Ulmer, was the regular system of production planning. This what-the-hell, gambler's-luck attitude epitomises what was most engaging about the studio—as against the more calculated policy of a Monogram, always inclined to play safe with yet another *Charlie Chan* or *Bowery Boys* programmer.

The same kind of desperate insouciance could inform even the shakiest PRC feature. Given five-day shooting schedules, with—again according to Ulmer—as many as eighty camera set-ups per day, retakes were a scarce luxury; minor, and for that matter major, imperfections became part of the fabric. Not just the sound boom, but cue cards and the odd discarded



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the struggle for the film

Towards a Socially Responsible Cinema

BY HANS RICHTER

Translated by Ben Brewster
with a Foreword by A.L. Rees

Written in political exile in the 1930's, finally published in 1976, and now available in English for the first time, this book provides a fresh contribution to the understanding of the relations between radical art and political thought in a crucial period. As a leading avant-garde film-maker and an ardent supporter of the 'new cinema' (a movement hostile to the commercial film), Hans Richter looks at the history of cinema and its nature as an instrument of capitalism. He also explores the alternative 'progressive film' within this reactionary-dominated cinema, citing many important instances.

192 pages	illustrated
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clapperboard were liable to feature in frame, adorning gangster hideouts or Western saloons. Characters' dimensions varied disconcertingly from one shot to the next, as five-foot stunt doubles strove nobly to impersonate six-foot actors. In *Today I Hang* the hero habitually enters his girlfriend's house via the side entrance—not from furtiveness, but because the budget wouldn't stretch to a front door.

The perennial quest for maximum value per dollar often prompted notable ingenuity. William Beaudine not only shot *Men of San Quentin* entirely at the jail itself, but roped in the prison band—no doubt at rather below union rates—to provide the music score. PRC even managed to produce a war epic, *Corregidor*, without shooting a single frame of combat footage (lots of newsreel material, plus a few explosions from the stock library). And when a bit player named Alan Ladd achieved sudden fame elsewhere, the studio weren't above doctoring the lobby cards to substitute Ladd's face for that of the original lead.

PRC's directors, like their actors, were a mixture of beginners headed for better things (Sirk, Anthony Mann), old-timers on their way down

(Christy Cabanne, Griffith's assistant from pre-Hollywood days), and a roster of uninspired work-horses. Plus, of course, those oddball artists whose talents seemed to flourish only at this tawdry level, such as Ulmer and his fellow B-maestro, Joseph H. Lewis. In their work, the technical defects—dim lighting, fusty sets and wretched performances—are turned to account, yielding a pervasively claustrophobic tension, a skid-row existentialism which can still communicate with a vitality lacking in the glossiest offering of the period from Metro or Paramount.

Something of this comes over in the three most substantial pieces in Wheeler Dixon's book, all of them reprints (though none the less welcome for that). Don Miller's 'Brief History of PRC' is rendered even briefer by stopping dead at 1945, since his long unavailable *B Movies*, from which it's extracted, only covered the period 1933-45. From another stubbornly out-of-print volume, McCarthy and Flynn's *Kings of the Bs*, come a useful survey of 'B Movie Structure', and excerpts from Peter Bogdanovich's classic *Film Culture* interview with Ulmer. Otherwise, we get twelve pages of 1944 movie industry statistics (just why 1944 is any-

body's guess); an affectionate intro from William K. Everson; and—by far the most valuable section of the book—a checklist, with credits, of all known PRC releases. The 'runt of the Hollywood litter' (Don Miller's term) still awaits a worthy memorial; but whoever writes it will have Dixon to thank for some assiduous spadework.

PHILIP KEMP

World view

DICTIONNAIRE DU CINEMA

edited by Jean-Loup Passek

Librairie Larousse/349Fr

The Cartesian temperament of the French makes them a nation ideally suited to producing good dictionaries. Methodology is their speciality; it leads to rigorous cataloguing, the backbone of any work of reference. Most French film historians at some point convert their research into dictionary form; Georges Sadoul's two small volumes have become indispensable. Anglo-Saxon film historians, on the other hand, such as Rotha and Wright, cling dearly to prose form. Now Larousse, internationally renowned for their dictionaries, have produced a *Dictionnaire du Cinéma*.

Quantity and quality go hand in hand in this lavish tome. There are 706 pages of text, 96 pages of photographs, a lengthy international bibliography, a technical glossary, and the detailed credits of 2001 films. It is difficult to resist the momentum that builds up from a first consultation and not while away hours pursuing the reference of one entry across any of the 4,699 others. But this is not a hefty reference book in FIAF catalogue style, nor a guide in the train-spotting manner of a Halliwell *Filmgoer's Companion*. Rather, it is a work of historical and critical fluency, a scholarly mixture of dependable fact and critical acuity.

The Dictionary is described as a 'compass', a sort of rambler's aide to film history. It certainly helps chart areas often neglected by all but the most specialised publications. There are, for example, informative essays on the national cinemas of Iraq, Iran, Korea and Senegal. Despite acute archive and conservation problems in such research, Jean-Loup Passek, the editor, stresses the need for a truly world view of cinema. Consequently, aspects of film history well documented elsewhere do not receive disproportionate attention.

The historical breadth is

matched by the scope of the technical entries; scriptwriters, composers, editors, cameramen and designers are considered as well as directors and performers. There are articles on genres, technical, economic and legal aspects of film-making, the film press, festivals and inventors. Critics and theorists are also treated, but with some notable lacunae: semiology must have been a particularly dirty word at editorial meetings as neither Metz nor Burch is mentioned.

These omissions are significant. They indicate the somewhat conservative spirit of 'cinephilia' which characterises the dictionary. This is only to be expected from the pedigree of its contributors, resembling a directory of distinguished critics, historians and archivists, the mainstay of journals such as *Positif* and *Cinéma*; no place here for the more sparkling polemicists of *Cahiers du Cinéma* (Michel Chion apart). Indeed, Passek insists that the dictionary's role is one of 'analysis rather than polemics'. But its resulting tone of pseudo-objectivity is not itself without dogmatic and contentious preferences, potentially dangerous given the authority the dictionary is likely to assume.

This can be seen when comparing the entries on leading film journals. Predictably, the solid pluralism of *Cinéma*, *Positif*, *La Revue du Cinéma* and *SIGHT AND SOUND* is extolled; but the entry on *Cahiers du Cinéma* talks emotively of 'aesthetic idealism' and 'obsessive interpretation' following Bazin's death, and rejoices in the post '77 return to 'cinephilia' after 'hermetic' and 'arid reflection' in the late 60s and early 70s, the very years which, to be chauvinistic, so influenced *Screen* (not mentioned) and the shape of film studies in Britain.

The true test of such a dictionary, however, is the reliability of its facts, and Passek's team is particularly dependable on this score. It would be churlish to list the few errors I have so far come across when the general standard of accuracy appears so high. And if cross-referencing becomes pleasantly compulsive, the only minor upset for us non-French users is the need (for entries other than those on directors) to trace film titles back to their original form. Sometimes translator's licence goes a long way; *No Way Out*, Mankiewicz's pessimistic portrait of racism, sounds unjustifiably optimistic in its French title, *La Porte s'Ouvre*. Benevolent users will perhaps be more interested than irritated by such discoveries; but that should not stop them from demanding a complete translation of this excellent volume.

RICHARD ALWYN

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Chit-Chat

PEOPLE WILL TALK

by John Kobal

Aurum Press/£14.95

And talk and talk: about Joan Crawford's shoulders ('I thought Adrian had made them, but they were hers'), Garbo's brain power (called into question several times) and Mae West's height (she wore platform heels); about affairs, rivalries, parties, premières, dresses, salaries, being a legend, surviving middle-age. Errol Flynn, we learn, called Ida Lupino 'mad Idsy', while Ida called Flynn 'the Baron'. Sonja Henie, the skating smile, was an ornery miss who would skate herself into a spin and refuse to emerge. Bing Crosby was 'a doll', Robert Sherwood 'divine', and Jeanette MacDonald 'absolutely awful'. Louise Brooks thought Brooke Shields beautiful, but wondered, wisely, if she was anything else.

This is a book, then, of titbit and gossip, of fascinating information and silly burlblings, culled from interviews conducted by John Kobal over twenty years for various purposes: research, radio broadcasts, or the simple rite of fan meeting idol. No matter what the level of conversation, Kobal treats his subjects' utterances with a documentary thoroughness worthy of Holy Writ. The transcription process does not stop with words: it embraces laughs, snorts, silences and gestures, eccentric inflexions (instead of 'Never!' Joan Fontaine cries 'Nehviiiih'), the pouring of drinks, the serving of meals.

The words themselves keep most of their warts. Howard Hawks' brittle talk is sprayed with dots to cover twists and lacunae. Anna Sten's slow, grudging memories emerge weighed down with sighs, grunts and petulant squawks ('How would I know?'). Fog creeps over film titles: 'One of those long super things,' recalls the social lion and former screen vamp Dagmar Godowsky, while Louise Brooks remembers, charmingly, how fine Monroe was in 'that thing where she lived upstairs.' Outright errors are left intact, to be corrected by Kobal in footnotes.

In many cases these are valuable interviews. The 43 subjects—30 of them ladies—include big names that rarely hold forth: Barbara Stanwyck, taped in 1964 when she had William Castle's *The Night Walker* to publicise ('It is not a horror film. It's a shocker'); Joel McCrea, taped in 1983, speaking about Gregory La Cava, female co-stars, and want-

ing to be a frontiersman. Other names are more esoteric: period phenomena like Evelyn Brent and Camilla Horn; still photographers such as George Hurrell and Laszlo Willinger, remembering epic retouching sessions on Rosalind Russell's portraits, or the absurd antics of the women in *The Women*. Absurd antics continue in several of these encounters: Joan Crawford, caught in 1965, gushes from all corners and thinks it time for her to 'get back to glamour'; Miriam Hopkins laces her own ebullient performance with quotations from favourite poems. Others impress through their warmth and strength: Joan Blondell, a good-hearted, good-humoured trouper (just as in the movies); Vincent Sherman, another sensible professional; and the octogenarian Arletty—her spirit undimmed after surviving postwar imprisonment (for loving a German officer), advancing blindness, and some of her interviewer's remarks. 'You were born,' Kobal purrs, 'and just like a river you keep on flowing.'

At the same time, the amount of hot air and inconsequentiality contained in these 700-plus pages proves both fatiguing and maddening. Kobal not only encourages his subjects to gossip *ad libitum*; he also loves gossiping about himself and his life with the stars. To a degree this is justifiable: these are personal conversations, and the personality of the interviewer must be reckoned with. But it is doubtful if the reader needs to be told—over three pages—of the author faking playing bridge with Tallulah Bankhead, or his sister's nasty accident with a milk bottle while young Kobal was watching Korda's *Thief of Bagdad*. Such details—and there are many—only make the trivia mountain larger.

GEOFF BROWN

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

RICHARD ALWYN is preparing a thesis on the films of Jean Grémillon... PETER GREEN is an architect and writer who lives and works in Munich... LINDA LYNTON writes about video, film production and marketing from New York City in publications such as *American Cinematographer* and the *British International Journal of Advertising*, and is a member of the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers... JULIAN PETLEY is a research officer in the School of Visual Communications, Goldsmith's College, University of London... KAREN ROSENBERG is now a visitor at the Russian Research Center at Harvard... DAVID SPARK has worked with the London editorial office of Westminster Press.

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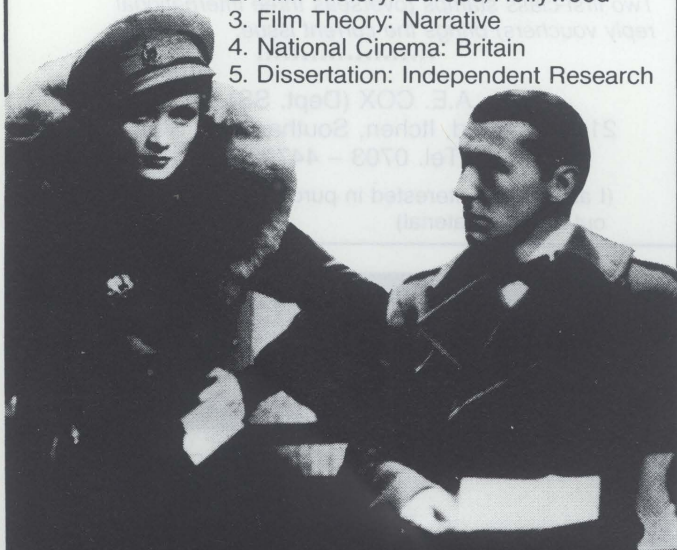
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LETTERS

Kane trailer

SIR,—Having only just encountered Barry Wilkinson's letter in the Autumn 1986 issue, I am happy to report that the *Citizen Kane* trailer which Mr Wilkinson describes—for the most part, quite accurately—is neither lost nor forgotten, and was omitted from my Welles survey only for reasons of space. In the US, at least, the trailer is currently available on the Criterion laser-disc edition of *Kane*, and has recently been shown at several Welles tributes.

Yours faithfully,
JONATHAN ROSENBAUM
Santa Barbara

National Film Theatre

SIR,—This is a plea for an improvement in the film descriptions provided in the National Film Theatre monthly programme bulletin. I do not suppose I am the only BFI member who would go to more of the NFT showings if it were easier to determine from the write-ups in the bulletin which are the films

one might want to see.

I find the write-ups a bit bland, perhaps too story-oriented, and too much alike. One step which might make an improvement would be to have each write-up indicate the name of its author. Readers could then get to know the critics. Critics, in turn, would be presented with more of a challenge. Absence of signature would be taken simply as meaning that NFT staff have not seen the film, and that the description is taken from another source.

Yours faithfully,
WALTER MICHEL
London SW1

The notes for each season are written by the author of the introduction to that season, unless otherwise indicated. In the Repertory section, unsigned notes are usually written by members of the NFT programme planning department. In this section, however, we do not aim to give more than an indication of plot and main areas of interest as these films are mostly quite well-known.

CLARE KITSON,
Programme Booklet Editor

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ARTIFICIAL EYE for *Farewell, Don Giovanni, Parsifal*, photograph of Andrei Tarkovsky.

CANNON for *Come and See, Otello*.

COLUMBIA-CANNON-WARNER for *The Mission, The Elephant Man*.

CURZON FILM DISTRIBUTORS for *A Room with a View*.

ELECTRIC PICTURES for *Golden Eighties*.

MAINLINE for *Always, Eraserhead*.

PALACE PICTURES for *Down by Law, Mona Lisa*.

THE OTHER CINEMA for *The Wobblies*.

RANK FILM DISTRIBUTORS for *Platoon*.

UIP for *Dune*.

UK FILM DISTRIBUTORS for *The Morning After, Blue Velvet*.

VIRGIN FILMS for *Salvador, Carmen*.

CIVILHAND/ZENITH for *Prick up Your Ears*.

CONDOR FEATURES for *Alice*.

CENTRAL MOTION PICTURE CO (Taiwan) for *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*.

CHINA FILM CO for *The Horse Thief*.

KIRGISFILM for *Heat*.

MK2/AUSTRA/PS-1 for *Opera do Malandro*.

M/S SURYA KANTHI FILM MAKERS for *Oridathu*.

MOSFILM for *The Ascent, You and I, Wings*.

BBC ENTERPRISES for BBC TV programmes, photograph of Broadcasting House.

BBC ENTERPRISES/ROGER LONG for *The Monocled Mutineer*.

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A short season of his films will be shown at the NFT to coincide with publication — **The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner** (15 March); **Zorba the Greek** (18 March) and **Tom Jones** (20 March).

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ON NOW

●THE MOSQUITO COAST

(UIP)
Like Fitzcarraldo, the hero of *The Mosquito Coast*—driven, boastful, inventive—is impelled to transform the world, if not exactly in his own image, then in the name of some improvements to God's handicraft. Family in tow, Allie Fox (Harrison Ford, a tyrant of sweet, sweaty charm) sets off for the jungles of Honduras, with one major engineering wrinkle in his backpack: a machine which, out of fire, can produce ice, which in turn Allie sees as the basis for a civilisation far superior to the built-in obsolescence and fast food of the one he has left behind. Mad, noble, and inevitably doomed, the project eventually goes sky high, and the rest of the film is a steady winding-down for this fallen god of self-help, while his family try to reclaim their own lives. Peter Weir's adaptation of Paul Theroux's novel is remarkably faithful in plot and detail, but fails to plug into the obsessiveness of Allie's quest, or into the blacker reaches of despair and sardonic humour that attend its failure. (Helen Mirren, River Phoenix, André Gregory.)

BLISS

(Entertainment)
An advertising executive drops dead, but returns slightly altered and lives out an increasingly crazy life in an increasingly crazy world. Three-quarters fine black comedy with surreal touches, but with a draggy hippie idyll at the end. (Barry Otto, Lynette Curran, Helen Jones; director, Ray Lawrence.)

CACTUS

(Blue Dolphin)
Frenchwoman in Australia finds she is losing her sight; spiritual relief is at hand from a man who has been blind since birth. Paul Cox's treatment has a visual grace and force of personality which sidesteps the sentimental pitfalls but cannot altogether efface a sense of attenuation. (Isabelle Huppert.)

CAMORRA (THE NAPLES CONNECTION)

(Columbia-Cannon-Warner)
Ugly and hysterical account of a series of murders among the drug-dealers of Naples; supposedly an indictment of underworld decadence, Lina Wertmüller's feminist melodrama wastes its energies on spectacularly silly musical and erotic interludes. (Angela Molina, Harvey Keitel, Francisco Rabal.)

CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD

(UIP)
Long and slow-moving opening-out of the stage success about the

romantic relationship between a teacher and a troubled deaf girl. A few arty visual flourishes and gestures towards four-letter frankness point up, rather than gloss over, a pervasive noveletish tone. (William Hurt, Marlee Matlin; director, Randa Haines.)

DUET FOR ONE

(Columbia-Cannon-Warner)
Concert violinist endures the onset of muscular dystrophy, her decline accelerated by a remarkably unattractive circle of friends and lovers. Kempinski's skilful monologue, expanded for the screen to a babble of extraneous voices, has been largely anaesthetised by bland casting and Andrei Konchalovsky's respectful but damagingly sentimental style. (Julie Andrews, Alan Bates, Max von Sydow.)

84 CHARING CROSS ROAD

(Columbia-Cannon-Warner)
In this latest version of the famous correspondence, Anne Bancroft is the insatiable New York bibliophile Helene Hanff and Anthony Hopkins (in quiet good form) the old-world London bookseller Frank Doel. The formula, it seems, is still infallible: literary, sentimental and genuinely touching. (Director, David Jones.)

FATHERLAND

(Palace)
Dissident East German singer, exiled to the West, goes in search of his father, who travelled a similar route three decades before. The trail leads, quite intriguingly, to Cambridge, whose deceptive mellowness is caught by Chris Menges' camera in striking contrast to the hard light of Berlin. Despite some sharp detail, however, the tone is more arid than provocative. (Gerulf Pannach, Fabienne Babe; director, Ken Loach.)

FIREWALKER

(Columbia-Cannon-Warner)
Chuck Norris tries to exchange his ultra-macho action man persona for the species of self-mocking action man persona worn so well by Harrison Ford or Michael Douglas, but is undone by a lack of comic timing. Lou Gossett and Melody Anderson tag along in search of a Mayan/Aztec tomb, and wind up in sets left over from director J. Lee Thompson's *King Solomon's Mines*.

FLIGHT OF THE NAVIGATOR

(Disney)
Missing since the Carter era, a kid turns up unaged and pals around with a sentient flying saucer that needs him to complete its mission. A pleasant bit of kids' sci-fi, with a regulation Evil Government, the usual Disney family, and surprising dollops of nostalgia for the good old days of 1978. (Veronica Cartwright, Cliff De Young; director, Randal Kleiser.)

THE HOLY INNOCENTS

(Blue Dolphin)
Acquiescent peasant family, crushed by the indifference of its employers on a remote Spanish

estate in the 1960s, achieves a bizarre revenge. By turns beautiful and disturbing, this is black comedy artfully disguised as social realism, its superb performances headed with cackling eccentricity by Francisco Rabal. (Alfredo Landa, Terele Pávez; director, Mario Camus.)

JUMPIN' JACK FLASH

(UKFD)
After *The Color Purple*, Whoopi Goldberg was obviously destined for the star treatment. Pity it has been done so obtusely, with the poor girl encouraged to give a running, jumping, eternally mugging performance as a computer operator who taps into a sub-James Bond adventure. Exhausting, though she has moments. (Stephen Collins, John Wood; director, Penny Marshall.)

MACARONI

(Palace)
American executive discovers he has become a legend to an obscure Neapolitan family, thanks to the imagination of a forgotten wartime friend. Lemmon and Mastroianni are teamed for some rueful humour, heavily garnished with affectionate goodwill, but the recipe lacks any real flavour. (Director, Ettore Scola.)

THE MAGIC TOYSHOP

(Palace)
A less successful transposition of Angela Carter's world than *The Company of Wolves*, labouring over the distinction between fantasy and reality as the 15-year-old heroine awakens to sex against the bizarre backdrop of her uncle's sinister marionette shows. Good performances and striking images, but ultimately pedestrian. (Tom Bell, Caroline Milmo; director, David Wheatley.)

THE MEN'S CLUB

(Entertainment)
A group of men approaching mid-life crisis get together to discuss the problem of women in a confessional gush mixing macho and sentimental attitudes. A visit to a whorehouse allows them to get down to basics, and the film to end on a note of symbolic fantasy borrowed from Genet's *The Balcony*. Salvaged, more or less, by a first-rate cast. (Roy Scheider, Harvey Keitel, Richard Jordan; director, Peter Medak.)

NO MERCY

(Columbia-Cannon-Warner)
Nine 1/2 Weeks set in the Louisiana swampland—a piece of casting which obviously promises something as steamy and atmospheric as the pairing of Kim Basinger and Richard Gere. In fact, there would be little point or presence to this straightforward revenge fable—Chicago cop Gere takes off after his partner's sinister Cajun killers—if it weren't for Richard Pearce's lush execution of the atmospherics.

OVER THE TOP

(Columbia-Cannon-Warner)
Arm-wrestlin', truck-drivin' man Sylvester Stallone tries to patch up his relationship with his estranged son and, thanks to a

bucketful of contrivance, has to become a world champion to get custody of the kid. This would-be *Rocky* is upstaged by a single arm-wrestling sequence in *The Fly*. (Robert Loggia; director, Menahem Golan.)

SOUL MAN

(Entertainment)
C. Thomas Howell blacks up to win a scholarship which will support him through Harvard Law School, and Learns His Lesson. Toothless satire, distinguished only by Rae Dawn Chong's nice smile and a few good songs. (Director, Steve Miner.)

SPACECAMP

(Rank)
By unlikely accident, a group of teenage astronauts is launched into space and amid ramshackle special effects, endeavours to excite interest in the possibility of its survival. Attempting to restore confidence in NASA's tragic space-shuttle programme, this unappealing adventure misfires on most cylinders. (Kate Capshaw, Lea Thompson, Tom Skerritt; director, Harry Winer.)

TOUGH GUYS

(Touchstone)
Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas are ex-cons freed after thirty years for a train robbery, which the rigours of going straight soon impel them to repeat. More or less an excuse for this venerable partnership to work out again, stronger on actorish charm than plot, with a relishable bit of overplaying by Eli Wallach as a tetchily superannuated hit man. (Director, Jeff Kanew.)

THE VOYAGE HOME: STAR TREK IV

(UIP)
The old crew timewarp to 1987 to save the world of the future by rescuing a pair of humpbacked whales. Liberal eco-blather, spiced by a few out-of-time jokes left over from co-scenarist Nicholas Meyer's *Time After Time*. The elderly cast indulge their fans. (William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, DeForest Kelley; director, Leonard Nimoy.)

WITHNAIL AND I

(HandMade)
Bruce Robinson, writer of *The Killing Fields*, drew on his experiences as a drama student and actor at the end of the 60s for this End of an Era statement. Paul McGann and Richard E. Grant sink ever deeper into degeneration, fortified by drink and drugs and bound together by dreams of stardom. A sometimes agreeable comedy of manners, excellently played, notably by Richard Griffiths and Michael Elphick.

WIVES—TEN YEARS AFTER

(Enterprise)
Ten years on, the three errant heroines of *Wives* meet up again for yet another 'lost weekend': it's quickly apparent, however, that they are still ambivalent about the men in their lives, past and present, and indeed about their friendship with each other. (Director, Anja Breien.)

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